The Dungeon Master Experience

Chris Perkins

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This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

–Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Christopher Perkins

Christopher Perkins joined Wizards of the Coast in 1997 as the editor of *Dungeon*® magazine. Today, he's the senior producer for the *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Roleplaying Game* and leads the team of designers, developers, and editors who produce D&D RPG products. On Monday and Wednesday nights, he runs a D&D® campaign for two different groups of players set in his homegrown world of Iomandra.

Surprise! Epic Goblins!

2/17/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The adventurers are 22nd level, and crewing a ship heading west across the Dragon Sea.

The Maelstrom is a swift vessel powered by an elemental ring of water (an idea pilfered from the Eberron campaign setting). One of the adventurers, a genasi swordmage, was recently relieved as captain of the Maelstrom so that he could lead a special ops mission for his mentor and benefactor, Sea King Valkroi. (You might recall that the same thing happened to Captain Picard in the ST:TNG episode, Chain of Command.)

Three days ago, the Maelstrom survived a run-in with three enemy ships sent by a rival Sea King. Having weathered that storm, the Maelstrom has resumed its westward trek toward the party's ultimate objective.

En route, the adventurers catch sight of a lone vessel heading in the opposite direction. Corpses are lashed to the other ship's hull, and its sails are stained crimson with blood. The adventurers confronted a ship like this once long before, during the heroic tier, when goblins raided their island home. Clearly this blood-sailed vessel belongs to the Kingdom of Sanghor, a savage island nation of goblins far to the west.

That's right. Goblins. At 22nd level, no less.

Our heroes would've been inclined to leave goblin ship alone but for two reasons. First, the party's ranger spots a cage being dragged alongside the goblin ship at sea level. Within the cage, he sees a prisoner struggling to stay above water. Second, the ship is openly plying the trade lanes and is clearly a threat to passing tradeships. The noble heroes decide to storm the ship and rescue the caged prisoner.

What ensues is a rollicking shipboard battle against an enemy the heroes never expected to fight at their level.

Reasons for the Encounter

This goblin ship encounter was meant to provide context for the larger campaign world. I created the side trek to remind my players (and their characters) that there's far more going on in the world of Iomandra than "the quest at hand." The goblin ship's ability to slip past Dragovar patrols tells the heroes something meaningful about the world—that the Dragovar navy has lost control of the Dragon Sea. The war to the west (against a former imperial regency fallen under horrors from the Far Realm) has taken its toll on the imperial fleet, and the goblins of Sanghor are seizing advantage of the situation.

But there was one more reason for the encounter. This one-night diversion was also crafted to remind the heroes **how powerful they have become**. The hobgoblin captain (Mulk, a level 8 soldier) was literally a pushover—he got thrown off his ship by a magical whirlwind in the first round of combat. The goblin mage (Zazz, a level 7 controller) was snuffed out before he could monologue. The bugbear shocktroopers were swept aside like dust bunnies.

One might expect players to get bored fighting weak enemies and scores of minions—and yet this became one of the campaign's most memorable encounters. Like many DMs, I enjoy watching my players squirm and wrestle with conundrums, but giving the heroes an (occasional) overwhelming advantage presents a refreshing change of pace, particularly when they don't see it coming from a mile away.

All that being said, I still had some surprises in store for them. They say good things come in threes, so here we go:

Surprise #1: Boom Goes the Dynamite! The goblins filled their cargo hold with kegs of alchemical "black powder," rigged to blow up the ship if things went horribly awry. After Captain Mulk got the heave-ho, the goblins decided the time was nigh. And they would've succeeded too—if it hadn't been for the party's pesky halfling rogue, Oleander. After the goblin demolition squad inadvertently set off three powder kegs and filled the lower decks with blinding smoke (a trick I used to foreshadow the imminent destruction of the ship), Oleander jumped into the smoke-filled hold; once there, he used his formidable Bluff skill to impersonate Captain Mulk, telling the demolition squad to forgo the black powder and get their flea-bitten hides on deck (whereupon they were promptly killed).

Surprise #2: Advantage, Goblins! I decided not to make attack rolls for the goblins because there were so many of them. Basically, the goblins had no effective attacks. In place of an attack roll, a goblin could deal 15 damage automatically to one enemy it had combat advantage against. This made the tactical combat more interesting and forced the heroes to stay mobile, and it also felt right for goblins.

Surprise #3: Minions are the BOMB! Given the goblins' propensity for alchemical experimentation, it seemed perfectly reasonable that Captain Mulk would have a squad of "exploding goblins" tricked out with bandoliers of alchemical fire flasks. Any damage dealt to a tricked-out goblin minion would cause it to explode in a close burst 1 centered on itself, dealing 15 fire damage to all creatures in the burst . . . including other rigged goblins. Clearly the best tactic was to take out the goblins from afar—but a tall order on the confined and crowded deck of a ship!

By the end of the session, the heroes had not only dispatched the goblins but also rescued the caged prisoner who, it turns out, was first mate of another ship that the goblins had attacked and plundered. Naturally, he presented the heroes with a quest—to transport his ship's stolen cargo safely back to the raft-town of Anchordown—and thereby earn the favor of another Sea King.

One can only speculate what might happen to the heroes in the course of completing this seemingly straightforward side quest....

Lessons Learned

In any case, here's what I learned from the goblins encounter:

- **Never underestimate the appeal of kicking ass. Players need to feel powerful once in a while, particularly at high levels.**
- **If you want your campaign world to feel like a living, breathing place, let the players encounter things below their level.**
- **Even low-level monsters can surprise the heroes with clever tactics and a never-say-die attitude (just consider the history of asymmetrical warfare). Don't be afraid to use them, particularly as minions, and don't be afraid to mess with their stats.**

Until the next encounter!

Previously in Iomandra . . .

2/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

It's 6:15 PM. The players are gathering around the table, having just returned from picking up dinner. As is customary with the group, one of the players has bought my dinner and delivers it with an expression that I take to mean, "Here's your dinner, Mister DM Sir. Please be kind tonight." I smile, say thank you, and begin casting a ritual that has served me well for years, and which I now share with you.

This ritual is neither arcane nor divine. In fact, it's something I learned from watching episodic television. Many of the things that define my DMing style come from watching lots of serialized TV. Shows such as Lost and Battlestar Galactica immediately spring to mind, and you'll see me referring to them from time to time in this column.

The ritual in question is called Campaign Recap, and it always begins with the same three words:

Previously in Iomandra

You've seen this before: Previously on *Lost*. Previously on *Battlestar Galactica*. Any television show that carries the baggage of a complex mythology and features an ensemble cast needs this ritual to remind the audience how far their story's come. In this instance, the audience is my gaming group, and as much as I like to think that every one of my game sessions is unforgettable, that simply isn't true.

The Campaign Recap ritual begins thus: At the top of a sheet of lined paper, I write today's date and the name of tonight's adventure (which I oftentimes refer to as an episode) followed by a short list of bullet points. Each bullet point recounts, in the past tense, something that occurred in a previous session (not necessarily the last session) that might be significant to tonight's game. The bullet points are carefully thought out, and I try to limit them to a handful. Sometimes in my haste to jot down these notes, I get the order mixed up, so after writing down the bullet points I number them in the order in which I intend to recount them.

At this moment, the player characters are in the middle of an adventure entitled "Death Incarnate," having found themselves in the city of Io'drothtor searching for the lair of a dracolich named Icristus. Icristus used to be the dragon overlord of the massive island upon which Io'drothtor is built. (In the backstory of the campaign, Icristus was slain by a steel dragon named Krethmidion and his brood.) But enough history; let's get back to the ritual at hand.

At the end of last week's session, the heroes fought their way into the dracolich's lair; the session ended with Icristus rising from a pool of lightning-charged water to confront the interlopers. As the players

devour their dinners and begin speculating on the outcome of tonight's session, here's what I write down:

"DEATH INCARNATE" (1/19/11)

Previously in Iomandra . . .

- Alagon had the names of five blasphemous undead creatures burned into the fingers of his trigger hand by an emissary of the Raven Queen. In order to fulfill his epic destiny and take his place by the RQ's side, Alagon must track down and eliminate all five targets, one of which is a dracolich named Icristus.
- The heroes learned that Icristus was brought back from the dead years ago by an arcane sect called the Kalak Shun: outcast dragonborn wizards who practice necromancy. They also discovered that Icristus can control and command the otherwise benign ghosts that haunt the streets of Io'drothtor, effectively using them as spies.
- The heroes confronted a high-ranking member of the Kalak Shun in his tower. After slaying the necromancer and interrogating his apprentice, the heroes activated a magical portal called the Throat of Tharzuul, which led to Icristus's secret redoubt below the city.
- The heroes arrived at a subterranean elemental node serving as Icristus's lair, only to discover that the dracolich was not alone! Attending him were 4 Kalak Shun advisors mounted on dracoliches that were once Huge steel dragons—the slaughtered brood of Icristus's hated rival, Krethmidion.

As soon as I speak the words "Previously in Iomandra," a hush falls over the gaming table. The off-topic conversations end abruptly, and the players become all ears. This happens every time, without fail.

After speaking the words, I begin stringing together my bullet points into a rough narrative. The whole recap usually takes about a minute. I don't worry about adding detail because I trust that the players' memories will begin filling in the gaps automatically. The recap simply sparks their memories and puts the players in the right frame of mind to start the session.

Some DMs rely on their players to provide the recap. Having tried it as a DM and experienced it as a player, I think that's a mistake. Left to their own devices, players will often focus on the wrong details, or get the facts wrong, or phrase the recap in a way that doesn't reinforce the atmosphere you're trying to evoke. The recap is the DM's best tool to get the session started on the right foot, and to immerse players in the moment.

The recap focuses only on the details that are pertinent to the story at hand. Most of the bullet points in the example above tie to a specific player character: Alagon, a revenant ranger played by Andrew Finch. The Wednesday group has eight players, each with their own character arc, but it's Alagon that's really driving this particular session. The recap gives the players a sense of what they can expect out of tonight's game: a big fat fight against five dracoliches. For Alagon to achieve his epic destiny, Icristus must be destroyed. Simple as that.

While this particular session focuses on combat and one character's arc, the adventure as a whole is a tangled weave of many different plots, including a story revolving around the party's deva warpriest discovering secrets from a past life, the search for a missing party member, and the theft of a mystical set of tomes that chronicle the rise and fall of a kingdom wiped from history by Vecna. These are no less important to the players than Alagon's quest to prove himself to the Raven Queen, and next week's recap will probably include bullet points reminding the players where things left off with these other facets of the campaign.

One of the cool side benefits of this approach? If and when you decide to chronicle the events of your campaign, say, in a wiki, you need only refer to your binder or notebook filled with page after page of bullet points touching on the highlights. I've come to rely on my own recaps for just this reason.

Lessons Learned

Recaps kick off 99% of my gaming sessions. However, I can think of plenty of good reasons not to use recaps. The #1 reason is to intentionally jar or disorient your players. I remember one session that began with the words "Roll initiative!" It worked well because the players weren't expecting the sudden springboard into combat. We had ended the previous session at the beginning of a climactic encounter, the

players had the whole week to discuss tactics, and I could sense they were jazzed to start rolling dice. The recap wasn't necessary, and frankly I wanted to keep things moving at a breakneck pace.

Like all good rituals, mastery comes with repetition. If the Campaign Recap is something you'd like to experiment with, keep in mind the following:

- **Begin each session jotting down bullet points about "what's gone before."**
- **The Campaign Recap sets the tone for the session. Present the Campaign Recap yourself, and keep it short. Don't worry about covering all the bases. Hit the highlights, and let the players' memories fill in the gaps.**

Until the next encounter!

I Don't Know What It Means, But I Like It

3/3/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The campaign has taken a dark turn. Having just attacked an island base belonging to their hated enemy, Sea King Senestrago, the adventurers return to their ship with the spoils of victory. Yet upon their return, they find the ship adrift, its crew gone.

A thorough exploration suggests that the crew has been abducted. A strange sending stone discovered in the captain's cabin confirms their fears—through this device, the heroes are contacted by another campaign villain who's been shadowing their vessel, waiting to strike. He offers the heroes a trade: Their missing crew in exchange for a powerful relic the heroes have sworn to protect, an item which the villain desires above all and which, in the wrong hands, could cause great calamity. The question is, will the heroes agree to this exchange, knowing that surrendering the item will have serious repercussions? An intriguing dilemma . . .

. . . but not the focus of this particular article.

You see, there's also a "B story" unfolding at the same time concerning Bruce Cordell's character, a tiefling star pact warlock named Melech. Several sessions ago, a powerful star entity known as Caiphon branded him with a strange tattoo: that of a toothy black maw, slowly growing larger and larger over the course of the campaign. And in this most recent session, Melech received a gift from yet another star entity called Nihil, who imprinted upon Melech's mind a powerful ritual allowing him to summon "starspawn serpents" (inspired by the *Monster Manual* 3's serpents of Nihil, page 186). Bruce doesn't understand why his character is receiving gifts from these star powers, or what he's supposed to do with them.

And frankly, neither do I. Which brings us to the true subject of this article.

A good campaign, like a good stew, has many ingredients. Some ingredients add flavor to the campaign, others give it texture. Sometimes the ingredients are so subtle as to go unnoticed, and that's fine. Not everything you throw into the campaign is going to make a splash. The players will pick up on some elements, while others are quickly forgotten. Campaign building is an art, not a science. It all starts with ideas. I get ideas for my campaign all the time, and the first question that comes to my mind once I get an idea is: How can I fit this into the campaign? The answer is always the same: I just throw it in the pot and see what happens. Which brings us back to the title of this article:

I don't know what it means, but I like it.

Whenever I get a cool idea that I think is worth exploring in my campaign, I throw it into the mix—provided I can think of at least one character in the party whose story arc would benefit from its inclusion. By "benefit," I don't mean to suggest that the character necessarily becomes more powerful as a result. The ultimate goal is to add stuff to the campaign that makes the characters and their situations more interesting and fun to play. It's also a great way to give your campaign extra layers or depth.

Let's consider Melech's situation: Many months ago, I had an idea based on the fairly common experience of someone waking up one morning to discover he or she had a tattoo, but no memory of how it got there. (If that hasn't happened to you personally, it's probably happened to someone you know—just ask Alias, from *Curse of the Azure Bonds*) This was an idea I wanted to include in my game. At the time, Bruce's character was being overshadowed by the story arcs of other characters, and I wanted to give Bruce something to sink his teeth into while waiting for some of these other arcs to play out. So, without a lot of forethought, I gave Melech a magical tattoo that appeared out of nowhere. Here's the actual tattoo, written up as a magic item:

Tattoo of the Horizon Star **Level 20**

The mark of Caiphon, the horizon star, resembles a toothy maw that widens and grows as the wearer draws closer to his doom.

Lvl 20 125,000 gp
Wondrous Item
Requirement: You must have the Fate of the Void pact boon.

Property

When you spend an action point to take an extra action, all enemies in a close burst 5 centered on you take 10 radiant damage and are blinded until the end of your next turn.

Curse: When you fail a death save, you take damage equal to your level.

The curse is a nice touch, don't you think? It keeps the tattoo from being a simple power-up. It also conveys the flavor of the idea, that "an evil star power gives Melech a gift he can't refuse."

At the time, I had no clue what the tattoo meant or how it would factor into the campaign. I included it simply because I liked the idea. Several weeks later, I was thinking about one of my major campaign villains—an eladrin star pact warlock hell-bent on releasing a bunch of evil star entities from their celestial prisons. It occurred to me that these same evil powers might be secretly courting Bruce's character, also a star pact warlock. Maybe they think he's destined for greatness. Maybe the gifts are a form of temptation. Maybe the star powers plan to devour *my* villain and groom Bruce's character as his replacement. At this point in the campaign, I'm still not exactly sure how it will all play out; a lot of it depends on Bruce and what happens to his character in the coming months. For now, the only thing I know for sure is that evil star powers have their eye on Melech . . . and that's enough to keep Bruce both excited and terrified.

Lessons Learned

As the DM, your biggest challenges are keeping the players immersed in the story of your campaign, and making the campaign world a place the players like to visit week after week (or however often you meet). It's also your job to surprise and delight them. One ironclad way to accomplish these admirable goals is to give players stuff to think about (and, by extension, stuff for their characters to think about). If you have an idea that fascinates you, don't wait for the right opportunity to include it. Just include it, and let time and your players sort it out.

If the idea ends up going nowhere, the players probably won't care (or even notice), but if it ends up going somewhere, your players will look upon you as a storytelling genius.

Here are the important takeaways:

- **Don't squirrel away your ideas. Use them, even if you're not sure how to get the most out of them.**
- **Ultimately, it's the players who decide what flies and what doesn't in your campaign. So look for a way to connect your cool idea to one or more of the characters, preferably in a way that the player(s) might enjoy.**

Until the next encounter!

My Campaign: The TV Series

3/10/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The party has reached the apex of an episode of the campaign entitled "Nythe-Saleme." The adventure takes place on an island ruled by the pair of purple dragon sisters, Nythe and Saleme (hence the name of the island and the episode)—but there's more to them than meets the eye. The sisters hold the answers to many secrets, including the whereabouts of the Dragovar emperor . . . whose disappearance is one of the biggest mysteries of the campaign.

Think of any serialized TV drama of the past decade that features a good-sized cast of characters. If you're stuck, I'll name a few off the top of my head: *Lost*. *Battlestar Galactica*. *The Sopranos*. *Deadwood*. *True Blood*. *Mad Men*. Now think of all the story characteristics those shows have in common with D&D campaigns you've created or imagined creating. I'd contend that the similarities are astonishing.

The truth is, if I hadn't wormed my way into the gaming industry, I'd probably be most happy working as a TV producer. I tend to think of my D&D campaign as a dramatic TV series for the following reasons:

- **My campaign has an ensemble cast of characters.**
- **It has episodic adventures, some of which are built around a larger mythology, while others have a more stand-alone feel.**
- **The episodes link together to form the "guts" of my campaign narrative, while simultaneously allowing for individual character development and, when it happens, character death.**

In fact, the only real difference I can ascertain between a D&D campaign and a serialized TV drama is that, unlike a TV show, a D&D campaign isn't likely to be televised. (Having said that, I dare someone to prove me wrong. I will pay tribute and homage to anyone who actually manages to turn his or her D&D campaign into a TV series.)

One of the payoffs for thinking about your campaign as a TV series is that you'll have an easier time remembering what's important: the characters and their ongoing development. That's why the players play in your campaign. It's what makes designing adventures so much fun. It's about the journey of the characters and the bad things and hilarious s**t that happen along the way.

Here are three tricks to help you get into the mindset of treating your campaign as a TV series:

Trick #1: Keep a running episode guide.

Fans write episode guides for their favorite series all the time. Why? Because it's fun. The episode guide chronicles all of the events that have transpired thus far. As you begin assembling your campaign episode guide, treat each adventure or play session as a separate episode, give them a number and a name, and write a short summary (no more than one paragraph!) of what happened. It's okay to leave out specific details of who-did-what-to-whom. It's okay to end on a cliffhanger. And it's perfectly okay to take a longer adventure and break it up into smaller episodes. (TV series do this all the time. It's called "Episode, Part 1" and "Episode, Part 2.")

Your episode guide can be any format, although wikis are ideal for this sort of thing. Because I run two separate campaigns in the same world, I keep separate wikis for my Monday night and Wednesday night games.

At the end of each one-paragraph episode write-up, include a "Notes" section where you can dump miscellaneous information worth keeping track of. I often use this space to mention important NPCs by name, recount weird occurrences and character actions that have little to do with the plot, and other wacky stuff.

In the right-hand column a sample write-up from my Wednesday night episode guide, modified slightly to make it comprehensible to those unfamiliar with the details of the Iomandra campaign.

Episode 149: Caves of the Kraken Cult, Part 1

Campaign Date: 10 Lendys 1475

In the back of an underground warehouse, the heroes discover an illusory wall concealing a secret network of caves infested with aberrations. The heroes make their way to a cavern occupied by half-mad kraken cultists guarded by hungry chuuls. Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) insinuates himself among the cultists and lures them into an ambush. The party then confronts the chuuls and remaining members of the cult. After a pitched battle, the heroes decide to withdraw and recuperate.

On their way out, they run afoul into a gang of Horned Alliance thugs led by Suffer, a tiefling with a whale-sized attitude problem. The heroes flee back into the caves. There, they find another exit connected to the Stone Rose Brothel in the city's dwarven district. Once back in the city, they take refuge at the Temple of Bahamut—and come face-to-face with the Horned Alliance's second-in-command, Prismeus, who makes them an offer they can't refuse.

Notes: Divin (played by Curt Gould) nearly dies after falling into a watery vortex at the bottom of a deep shaft. Divin calls to Melora for aid, and because he earlier placed some treasure on her altar, Melora answers his call, taking the form of a watery leviathan that lifts him up out of the vortex.

Trick #2: Think of your campaign in terms of seasons.

A season of a campaign might span any number of levels. My players have long-term commitments to my campaign, so I went with three seasons, each one spanning a tier (heroic, paragon, epic). If that works for you, steal the idea. If your game group is less stable, consider making your seasons shorter.

At the beginning of each season, I ask each player to give me a list of three things he or she would like to see happen during the season. These might be character-specific, or might be larger in scale. When my Wednesday group hit epic tier, I recalled that Rodney Thompson had a couple memorable things on his list: He wanted his character to transform from one race into another, and he wanted the heroes to participate in at least one full-scale naval battle. Stuff like this is very helpful, once you begin using Trick #3.

Trick #3: Imagine where your campaign is going, and concoct future episode ideas.

Once your episode guide is up-to-date, start writing 1-sentence descriptions for a bunch of episodes that haven't happened yet. This is what I call campaign projection; it's an opportunity to imagine what might happen in the weeks and months ahead, based on where the campaign's heading and the likely outcomes and consequences of the characters' actions up to this point. TV producers do something similar when they sit down to plot out upcoming seasons of their shows; they identify the stories they want to tell, and how best to develop their ensemble cast and "pay off" audience expectations. For your campaign, think of the ensemble cast as the characters in your game, with the players as your audience.

Here are some episode one-liners I wrote for the Wednesday game, many of which were inspired by the actions and ideas of my players:

The Red Shoals of Dkar
(Armos episode) The hunt for Fathomreaver leads the heroes to an elemental domain ruled by greedy pirates and bloodthirsty politics. (Aside: This idea was actually inspired by an article that Bruce Cordell wrote for *Dungeon*, so props to him!)

Master of the Maelstrom
(Deimos and Vargas episode) The heroes confront their nemesis, the pirate warlord Vantajar, on the high seas.

Impstinger Must Die
(Deimos episode) Sea King Impstinger is accused of launching a savage attack on a Dragovar settlement.

Defective
(Fleet episode) The characters are reunited with their warforged companion, but there's something different about him.

Constellation of Madness
A celestial event alters reality, allowing heroes from the Monday campaign to interact with heroes from the Wednesday campaign.

I've fleshed out the first three one-liners on this list in anticipation of actually running them as adventures; the rest are half-baked ideas that might or might not ever unfold. Some of these represent natural steps forward, or sudden twists in the major campaign arcs playing out this season; others are stand-alone adventure ideas that will hopefully inject some new villains and surprises into the campaign.

Some of your ideas for future episodes will get knocked off by better ideas. Others will die for reasons beyond your control; for example, a player (around whose character the idea was based) might drop out of the game. A few ideas might perish for logistical reasons. I really like the "Constellation of Madness" adventure idea; however, mixing and matching players from my two campaigns is a scheduling nightmare. Consequently, as cool as this idea sounds, it might not be as feasible as originally conceived. That said, I love the title and will definitely find a way to use that, if nothing else.

Don't be afraid to include future episode one-liners in your published campaign wiki. It's okay for the players to read them—desirable even. Here's why: It's fun to tease players with stuff that might happen, and just like teasers for a TV show, it excites them to think about the possibilities. It's worth noting that the ideas you flag as character-specific episodes shouldn't really focus on a single character; this should only serve to remind you that certain episodes help to advance specific character arcs. Show me a player who hates it when the spotlight shines on his character, and I'll show you a tarrasque that can fly!

Lessons Learned

To summarize: Imagine your D&D campaign as a TV series, with the heroes as your ensemble cast and the players as your audience. As the producer of this series, it's your job to imagine where the campaign is headed and what journey each character must make toward the inevitable finale. Sometimes your campaign will get cancelled prematurely, because it loses its audience; there's really nothing you can do about it except start over (and maybe target a new audience).

Here are some things to keep in mind if you decide to approach your campaign as a serialized TV show:

- **Think of your campaign in terms ofepisodes and seasons.**
- **Create a campaign episode guide.**
- **Write one-liners for future episodes to help you imagine where the campaign's headed.**

Until the next encounter!

Instant Monster

3/17/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Our heroes are 23rd level, fighting mind flayers aboard an illithid vessel on the Dragon Sea. The mind flayers are tied to one of the campaign's big story arcs involving a war between the almighty Dragovar Empire (ruled by dragonborn) and the upstart Myrthon Regency, a vassal state of the imperial commonwealth that has declared its independence. It's a familiar tale with a D&D twist.

Around 11th level, the heroes learned a major campaign secret: The Myrthon Regency was being influenced by mind flayers and other forces from the Far Realm. Knowing that most mind flayers fall in the level 18-20 range (in 4th Edition), my players started getting nervous by the time they reached 16th level. For my part, I'd expected mind flayers to start showing up around 19th or 20th level. As it turns out, through no fault of the players, the Monday night heroes really didn't get around to fighting their first mind flayers until now.

One of the dangers of running a complex campaign is that it's easy for the party to become involved in certain unfolding stories and not others. By the time mind flayers were back on the menu, the heroes had gained a bunch of levels. Consequently, the monsters I'd planned for them to fight were now several levels below the party average. Solving this problem demanded special DM ninja skills . . . and took a lot less time than you might think.

Welcome to the microwave dinner approach to monster design! By the end of this column, you'll have a new DM superpower: The ability to create a monster of any level "on the fly" in 2 minutes or less.

And by "create," I mean "customize." As much as I love creating new monsters from scratch (my favorite D&D activity, in fact, outside of actually running a game), it's usually unnecessary. Most players sitting on the other side of the DM screen can't tell the difference between a monster you've created from scratch and an existing monster that's been modified to suit your needs—so you should only create

monsters from scratch when you have the time or want to try something weird.

This article presents two simple and effective ways to customize a monster:

- **Take a monster and adjust its level.**
- **Turn a monster into another monster of the same level.**

The Perkinsian Approach to Adjusting a Monster's Level

My approach to adjusting a monster's level isn't mathematically perfect, but it serves the needs of most DMs. The ultimate goal is to tweak a monster so that it's level appropriate and doesn't cause players to shout "WTF!" during the game. This approach has three easy steps.

For each level you add or subtract:

- **Increase or decrease the monster's defenses and attack bonuses by 1.**
- **Increase or decrease the monster's hit points by 10 (x2 for elites, x4 for solos). If you're feeling finicky, make that 6 for artillery and lurkers, 8 for controllers, skirmishers, and soldiers. Just remember, this exercise is about easy math, not pinpoint accuracy.**
- **Increase or decrease the monster's damage by 1. If you're making a minion, its damage is usually around 4 + one-half the monster's level (minion brutes deal about 25% more damage on top of that).**

Don't bother adjusting the monster's **initiative modifier**, **skill modifiers**, or **ability score modifiers** unless you're a stickler for detail; these sorts of changes have little discernible impact on a monster's combat performance (at least, from the players' point of view). If the encounter warrants it, increase or decrease these values by 1 for every two levels you add or subtract, and be done with it.

Here's the **dolgaunt monk** from the *Eberron Campaign Guide*, and the dirt-simple level-adjusted version I used in the mind flayer adventure sprung on my players:

Dolgaunt Monk	**Level 8 Controller**
Medium aberrant humanoid (blind)	XP 350
Initiative +9	**Senses** Perception +7; blindsight 20
HP 86; **Bloodied** 43	
AC 22; **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 20	
Speed 8	
⊕ **Tentacle** (standard; at-will)	
Reach 2; +13 vs. AC; 2d4 + 5 damage, and the target is grabbed. The dolgaunt monk can't grab more than two creatures at once; see also *clutch of death*.	
⊕ **Fist** (standard; at-will)	
+13 vs. AC; 2d6 + 5 damage.	
┼ **Inexorable Drag** (minor; at-will)	
Targets a creature grabbed by the dolgaunt monk; +12 vs. Fortitude; the monk slides the target 2 squares.	
Clutch of Death	
A dolgaunt monk can grab with up to two tentacles at a time. While grabbing an enemy, it can act normally, but it can't use that tentacle for another attack. Enemies can attack the tentacle. An attack that hits the tentacle doesn't harm the dolgaunt monk, but it causes the tentacle to release the grab. The tentacle's defenses are the same as those of the dolgaunt monk.	
Vitality Leech ✦ **Necrotic**	
A target that begins its turn grabbed by the dolgaunt monk takes 10 necrotic damage, and the dolgaunt monk gains 10 temporary hit points.	
Alignment Evil	**Languages** Deep Speech, Goblin
Skills Acrobatics +14, Stealth +14	
Str 17 (+7)	**Dex** 20 (+9) **Wis** 17 (+7)
Con 14 (+6)	**Int** 11 (+4) **Cha** 12 (+5)

DOLGAUNT JAILER

(use Dolgaunt Monk, *Eberron Campaign Guide* p.203)
Level 21 Controller
HP 216/108, AC 35, Fort 33, Ref 34, Will 33
+13 to attacks and damage rolls

The Perkinsian Approach to Turning One Monster Into Another

As Jack Burton—er, I mean—Chris Perkins always says, you can't judge a monster by its level. At least, most players can't. What makes a monster memorable is its "shtick"—in other words, the one or two powers and/or traits that truly define what the monster does. As long as you're happy with the monster's attacks and powers, it doesn't matter where the rest of its stats came from.

First, find a monster of the **role** and **level** you need—preferably one that has at least one attack power or trait worth keeping—and do the following:

- **Give the monster a new name.**
- **Ignore any of the monster's powers or traits that are inappropriate or undesirable.**
- **If you're feeling creative (and only if you're feeling creative), give the monster a new trait or power—and by "new" I mean something you've invented on a whim or something lifted from another critter.**

Having trouble finding a monster of the appropriate role and level? Try surfing the "creatures by level" charts at the back of every 4th Edition monster book we've ever produced, or better yet, use the *D&D Compendium* online tool.

I'll be the first to admit it: This approach to monster customization is the D&D equivalent of stealing someone else's homework, erasing that person's name and writing your name on it instead—appropriate behavior for your home campaign only!

Here's the **infernal girallon** from the *Monster Manual 3*, transformed into a **foulspawn terrorhulk** for my Monday night campaign:

Infernal Girallon	**Level 22 Brute**
Large immortal beast (devil)	XP 4,150
HP 249; **Bloodied** 124	**Initiative** +18
AC 34, **Fortitude** 34, **Reflex** 30, **Will** 32	**Perception** +16
Speed 8, climb 6	Darkvision
Traits	
☼ **Threatening Claws** ✦ **Aura** 1	
Enemies within the aura grant combat advantage.	
☼ **Burning Soul** (fire) ✦ **Aura** 2	
Any enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes 10 fire damage, or 20 fire damage if the girallon is bloodied.	
Combat Climber	
The infernal girallon does not provoke opportunity attacks by climbing.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ **Claw** ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +26 vs. AC	
Hit: 3d12 + 10 damage.	
⊕ **Claw Flurry** ✦ **At-Will**	
Effect: The alpha makes the following attack four times.	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +26 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d12 + 8 damage.	
⊰ **Burning Ichor** (fire) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⁞⁞	
Attack: Close blast 3 (enemies in blast); +24 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 3d10 + 15 fire damage, and ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).	
Skills Acrobatics +23, Athletics +24	
Str 27 (+19) **Dex** 24 (+18) **Wis** 20 (+16)	
Con 19 (+15) **Int** 3 (+7) **Cha** 12 (+12)	
Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** –	

FOULSPAWN TERRORHULK

(use Infernal Girallon, *Monster Manual 3* p.103)
Level 22 Brute
–Replace the *burning soul* aura with a *psychic ooze* aura (deals psychic damage instead of fire damage, but otherwise identical).
–Replace the *burning ichor* power with a *psychic ichor* power (deals psychic damage instead of fire damage, but otherwise identical).
–Delete the **Combat Climber** trait.

The "Two-Fanged Strike" of Monster Customization

If you feel like flexing your DM ninja skills, try using both approaches on one monster. Here's an example of a monster that I wanted to include aboard my mind flayer ship, but was the wrong level and a bit too complex for my tastes. A dolgrim warrior is basically two goblins fused together, and I wanted my version to be a minion with traits that preserved the monster's shtick. The traits I ultimately gave the monster were "inspired" by the racial powers of elves and halflings. The end result:

DOLGRIM PEST

(use Dolgrim Warrior, *Eberron Campaign Guide* p.203)
Level 21 Minion Skirmisher
HP 1; **AC** 35, **Fort** 33, **Ref** 32, **Will** 33
+17 to attacks, 13 damage/attack
–Replace the **Double Actions** and **Combat Advantage** traits with:

Weez Awesome: Whenever it makes an attack roll, the dolgrim rolls twice and uses the higher result.

Weez Still Alive! (immediate interrupt; at-will)
Trigger: An enemy hits the dolgrim with an attack.
Effect: The triggering enemy must reroll the attack against the dolgrim and use the second roll, even if it's lower.

Dolgrim Warrior	**Level 4 Skirmisher**
Small aberrant humanoid	XP 175
Initiative +6	**Senses** Perception +3; low-light vision
HP 53; **Bloodied** 26	
AC 18; **Fortitude** 16, **Reflex** 15, **Will** 16	
Vulnerable 5 psychic	
Saving Throws +2 against charm and fear effects	
Speed 6	
⊕ **Club** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
+8 vs. AC; 1d6 + 3 damage.	
⊹ **Crossbow** (standard; at-will) ✦ **Weapon**	
Ranged 15/30; +8 vs. AC; 1d8 + 1 damage.	
Double Actions	
At the start of combat, the dolgrim warrior makes two initiative checks. Each check corresponds to one of the warrior's brains, and the warrior takes a turn on both initiative counts. The warrior has a full set of actions on each of these turns, and its ability to take an immediate action refreshes on each turn.	
Dolgrim Tactics (immediate reaction, when missed by a melee attack; at-will)	
The dolgrim warrior shifts 1 square.	
Combat Advantage	
A dolgrim warrior deals 1d6 extra damage against any creature granting combat advantage to it.	
Alignment Evil	**Languages** Deep Speech, Goblin
Str 17 (+5) **Dex** 15 (+4) **Wis** 13 (+3)	
Con 13 (+3) **Int** 9 (+1) **Cha** 9 (+1)	
Equipment light shield, club, crossbow with 20 bolts	

Lessons Learned

Use your newfound DM superpower freely and often, until it becomes as easy as breathing. Mastery comes quickly—in very little time, you'll be able to customize monsters "on the fly" while still keeping your players on their toes. The truth is, you should never have to create a monster stat block unless you really want to. Don't believe me? Take any monster stat block that's been published and do the following:

- **Write down the monster's name and a page reference.**
- **Make a "short list" of the custom changes you want to make to the monster.**
- **Run the monster using the old stat block and your "short list" of notes.**

Your players will either believe that you're running a monster right out of the book, or they'll think they're fighting something new. Either way, they're overjoyed—and you didn't kill yourself in the process.

Until the next encounter!

Point of Origin

3/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Three years ago. The Iomandra campaign has just gotten underway. The characters have converged on Kheth: a small, politically insignificant island in the middle of the Dragon Sea... an island with many secrets yet to be revealed.

Chris Youngs is playing a tiefling warlock named Deimos, who was shipwrecked on the island as a child nearly two decades ago. Little does Deimos know that the shipwreck was no accident, nor does he realize that the Dragovar Empire wants him dead. Neither Chris nor his character know that Deimos was, as a child, subjected to an arcane experiment that trapped the spirit of an ancient dragon-sorcerer inside him—or that he was sold off by his grandmother, the leader of a powerful tiefling thieves' guild called the Horned Alliance. Over the next several years, these secrets will come to light, and the full story of how Deimos came to the island will be known.

Every campaign starts somewhere. A tavern in Waterdeep. An isolated village. A ship wrecked upon the shore of the Isle of Dread. These are backdrops against which we first meet the characters—the heroes of the campaign. At this point, the campaign world is a complete mystery to the players, and the only things they can relate to are their characters. For this reason alone, it behooves the Dungeon Master to take some time before the campaign begins to create hooks that tether the heroes to the setting . . . origin stories that make the characters feel intrinsic to the world.

Once I've chosen a starting point for my campaign, but before play begins, I like to inspire my players to consider their characters' origins... get them thinking about where their characters came from. I'm less concerned about how the characters found one another; that bit of artifice usually isn't important, since most players are willing and eager to accept that fate or circumstance has brought their characters together. However, it's been my experience that players have trouble coming up with origin stories because their understanding of the world is so limited. (This is less true if you're running a campaign in a world with which the players are intimately familiar.)

All characters had lives before they became adventurers—at least, that's the underlying conceit of character themes (first introduced in the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting* and carried forward in other 4th Edition products published since). While character themes are terrific and I heartily encourage DMs to permit them in their campaigns, published themes can't account for the specific stories you're aiming to tell in the course of your home campaign. Consequently, I like to create origin stories that my players can choose from, if they're stuck for ideas.

After I decided to start my campaign on a small island, I spent a rainy Sunday afternoon writing up a bunch of different origin stories that my players could choose from. (It wasn't required that they do so. In some cases, my players already had an origin story in mind and I just needed to figure out how to fit it in.) This activity turned out to be a great exercise, because it forced me to think about different ways to bring characters together and connect them to events that were about to unfold.

Here's what I gave to my players as they were creating characters for the Iomandra campaign:

Your Origin Story

The campaign begins on the isle of Kheth, which begs the question: Are you a native of the island, or did events conspire to bring you here? Following are some likely origin stories for your character. Once you've chosen or concocted a story for your character, you can begin to hash out the details with the DM.

You're Tyrak'n Born

You are a native of Tyrak'n, the only settlement on Kheth. Your family lives in town and either fishes, forages, tends a modest garden, or runs a small business. You are friends with just about everyone in town, although you've probably forged a very close bond with at least one local citizen.

Racial Possibilities

- **If you are a half-elf between the ages of 17 and 25, you may choose to be the son or daughter of Magistrate von Zarkyn, giving you a fair amount of local clout. Your father is a shrewd leader and has taken great pains over the years to appease the island's green dragon overlord and uphold his grandfather's good name. Your mother is warm and funny in private, but surprisingly aloof and formal in public. You fear that there's something important she hasn't told you or your father . . . a secret she's likely to carry to her grave.**
- **If you are a halfling between the ages of 17 and 25, you may have had a troubled older or younger brother named Jynt who disappeared four years ago. Jynt broke the law when he persuaded two other local youths (a human boy named Jesper and a half-elf girl named Vazia) to join him on an expedition to the ruins atop Serpent Hill. No one is allowed there by order of the magistrate. Jynt and his friends never returned, and the magistrate refused to send a hunting party to find them.**

You're a Shipwrecked Orphan

Nineteen years ago, a ship called the *Morrow's Folly* crashed on the island of Kheth during a freak storm. The only survivors were the captain—a half-elf named Denarion Morrow—and several young children, yourself included. You were very young at the time (2-5 years old then, making you 21-26 years old now), and you don't remember anything. You and the other children were adopted by the local townsfolk and raised as natives. Although he's not much of a father figure, Captain Morrow has been watching over you all these years, but still claims that he can't remember anything that happened before the shipwreck. You have no clue where you came from, or who your real parents are. You're friends with just about everyone in town, although you've probably forged a very close bond with at least one local citizen.

Four years ago, three of your friends (a troubled halfling boy named Jynt, a curious human lad named Jesper, and a half-elf girl named Vazia) left town to explore Serpent Hill, even though locals are strictly forbidden to go there. They never returned. Captain Morrow urged Magistrate von Zarkyn to send a patrol to locate them, but the magistrate refused. The two men haven't spoken since. Jesper and Vazia were also survivors of the *Morrow's Folly* shipwreck, and Captain Morrow regrets not going after them himself.

You're Forsaken

You were born and raised elsewhere, brought to the island of Kheth by ship, and, for whatever reason, left behind. Hoping to find your place in the community, you've probably forged a close bond with at least one of the local citizens.

Racial Possibilities

- **If you are a dragonborn, you may be the son or daughter of parents who were exiled from Arkhosian soil. One or both of your parents may have been pirates or outspoken opponents of the Dragovar monarchy. In either case, they probably figured you'd be safer on a small, backwater island of little consequence to the rest of the Dragovar empire.**

- **If you are an elf between the ages of 24 and 30, you may choose to be the son or daughter of Lady Thariel von Zarkyn from a previous marriage. Your father is a wealthy ship captain named Torel Winterleaf who recently made some powerful enemies. Three weeks ago, you were spirited out of Io'calioth (the Dragovar capital) by your father's servants, smuggled aboard the tradeship Lantheon, and sent to stay with your mother for your own safety. You never got a chance to say goodbye to your father, and your mother didn't exactly welcome you with open arms. It's been 23 years after all, and your sudden arrival has created unrest in Von Zarkyn Manor. For his part, Magistrate von Zarkyn seems to be handling the situation quite well, particularly since your mother never told him she had a child with her previous husband.**
- **If you are a tiefling between the ages of 17 and 25, you may choose to be the niece or nephew of Lucius Vezetus, the friendly proprietor of the *Talisman*. You were born and raised in the slums of Io'calioth, and several years ago your parents brought you to see "Uncle Lucius" as a child and left you with him without explanation. Although he makes you do chores around the tavern, your uncle has been very forgiving of your irksome adolescent antics. When asked about your parents, he merely frowns and grumbles in Supernal.**

None of the Above

Perhaps you've come to Kheth for entirely different reasons. As a result, you may or may not have forged strong ties with the community. Some brief suggestions are listed below:

- **Someone you care about was arrested ten years ago by Dragovar authorities and sent to the prison island of Mheletros. You believe this person was imprisoned wrongfully, and the key to clearing his or her good name rests with a missing sea captain named Denarion Morrow . . . whom you've finally tracked to the backwater town of Tyrak'n on the island of Kheth.**
- **You swindled or double-crossed a sea captain named Lydia Taralan, only to discover afterward that she was working for Sea King Senestrago. Upon learning the truth, you fled aboard the hammership *Lantheon*, headed for Tyrak'n. You've opted to lay low until things blow over. Hopefully by then, you'll have found some protection . . . or some way to make amends.**
- **The church of Avandra has sent you to Tyrak'n to assist the local priest, Sister Alyson. She specifically requested "someone gifted with an adventurous spirit." Alyson believes that certain townsfolk are blessed with an adventurous nature that will soon manifest, but they need Avandra's assistance to survive their travails. You are the one Sister Alyson hopes will help these other adventurers "safely walk the dark path."**
- **You had a vivid dream about a silver dragon. It asked you to travel to the island of Kheth and locate a man named Johias Ilum. The dragon in your dreams sounded real enough, and also claimed that the rewards for your success would be great.**

Lessons Learned

One of the joys of running a campaign is watching the players learn its mysteries. However, at the start of the campaign, everything is a mystery. One of the ways you can tell the players a little bit about the world and build anticipation for what's to come is to give them origin story ideas that you can connect to some of the bigger stories of your campaign.

Case in point, Chris Youngs was looking for a hook to tie his tiefling character to the world of Iomandra, and he liked the "You're a Shipwrecked Orphan" idea quite a bit. He also liked the idea that Deimos would form a close bond with Lucius Vezetus, the tiefling proprietor of the *Talisman*. They were, after all, the only tieflings on the island.

You only need a handful of origin stories, and the time you invest in their creation will pay off in spades over the course of the campaign. Here's why I love creating them:

- **Origin stories make the heroes feel like living, breathing elements of your campaign world.**
- **Origin stories come with pre-built hooks for adventures. Let the events of the past inform the events of the future.**

Until the next encounter!

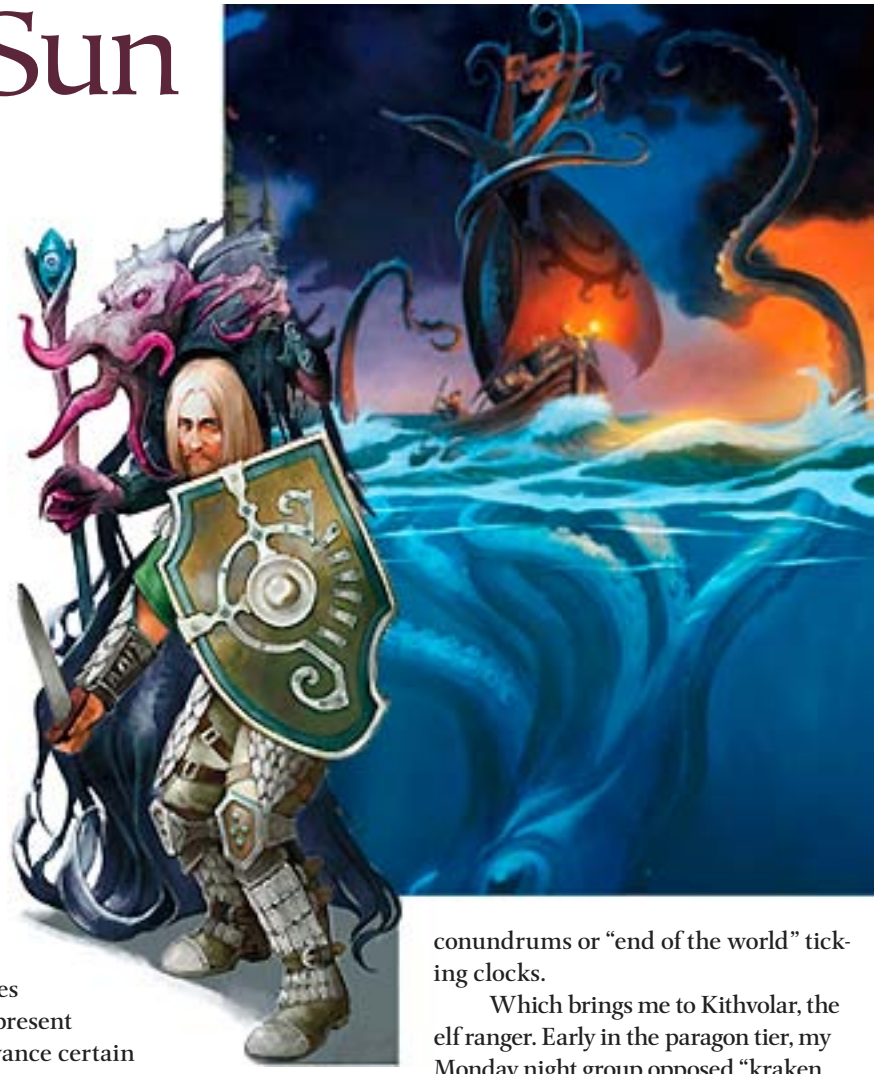
A Moment in the Sun

3/31/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

As happens from time to time, three of my eight players are absent, so this game session is a bit more intimate than usual. The combats move quickly and seem a lot more dangerous, probably because I'm not the kind of merciful DM who adjusts encounters to account for absent players!

Fortunately, one of the attending players is Jeff Alvarez. By day, Jeff is the VP of Operations at Paizo Publishing, but on Monday nights, he transforms into the elf ranger Kithvolar: a whirling dervish of gut-spilling destruction who deals obscene amounts of damage. Tonight is Kithvolar's moment to shine—Jeff is about to learn that he's not in complete control of his character, and that something vile is living in his brain....



A quick aside: This article was inspired by a question posed at a PAX East seminar called "The Rat Bastard's Guide to Running Long Campaigns." Experienced DMs will find the point of this article rather obvious. If your reaction to the article is "No kidding," then you're well ahead of the curve. However, as with all things, that which is most obvious is often most ignored, and countless campaigns and players have suffered because experienced DMs have forgotten what I'm about to share with you.

In an earlier article, I recommended treating your campaign like a TV series. If you analyze some of the best dramatic series in recent history, you'll see that individual episodes generally focus on plot, character, or both. When Mulder and Scully are exposing the government's cover-up of alien-human hybridization, they're in a plot-driven episode of *The X-Files*. When they're investigating the abduction of Mulder's sister or dealing with the fact that Scully has cancer, they're in a character-driven episode. Sometimes these two things cross: When we learn that Mulder's sister and Scully's cancer are part of a worldwide conspiracy, things get really twisted. When the *Battlestar Galactica* crew is trying to escape from Cylon-occupied New Caprica, we're talking plot, but we also have moments in which different character arcs are expanded: Saul Tigh's discovery that his wife is a Cylon collaborator, Kara Thrace's attempts to escape imprisonment, Lee Adama's "battle of the bulge," and so on.

I have three overarching (i.e., world-shaping) plots that form the foundation of my campaign. However, I'm always looking for opportunities to do "character episodes"—to present individual quests that help advance certain character arcs and give objectives that are personal. Again, TV series do this all the time; if all the *Battlestar Galactica* crew did was fight Cylons week after week, the series would get tiresome, and we'd stop caring about the characters. When push comes to shove, it's the heroes that are most important, not convoluted plotlines or crafty villains or ethical conundrums or "end of the world" ticking clocks.

Which brings me to Kithvolar, the elf ranger. Early in the paragon tier, my Monday night group opposed "kraken cultists" lurking underneath the city of Io'galaroth. The adventure culminated in an encounter with some aberrant horrors, during which Kithvolar fell unconscious. Amid the chaos—and unbeknownst to the players—a mind flayer implanted a critter in the elf ranger's brain before slinking back to the Far Realm.

Flash forward several game sessions: The heroes are in the creaking bowels of Anchordown (a floating "raft town"), assaulting a nest of aberrations. Strangely, none of the creatures seem to be attacking Kithvolar, and the players have no idea why. Also, Kithvolar sees disturbing things the other characters don't, such as tentacles crawling inside the walls.

Flash forward several more game sessions: The thing in Kithvolar's brain has matured. It takes control of his mind and uses him to assassinate the trusted adjutant of a Dragovar military general, throwing the empire into chaos. A simple ritual is enough to remove the critter in his brain, but the more interesting questions are how will Kithvolar react to being used as a pawn, and can he make amends? Jeff's character is standing at the epicenter of the action, and Kithvolar will help set the tone and direction of the campaign going forward.

Every character deserves a moment in the sun.

Sometimes the moment comes unexpectedly when a character does something particularly cool and memorable, or when something surprising happens to that character. However, a good DM doesn't wait for these moments. A good DM also prepares for them. As I prepare for a session, I ask myself, "Which character is this 'episode' about?" It's okay to be proven wrong—after all, you can't always predict what'll happen once the players convene and the dice start rolling! I remember planning an entire Monday game around Bruce Cordell's character . . . which was great, except that Bruce couldn't make it. (That was the infamous session in which Bruce's character was decapitated.)

Before you run your next game session, ask yourself which character gets the spotlight . . . and then see how right you are. Week after week, if you discover that the answer is the same one or two characters, consider that a warning sign: Not all of your player characters are getting their moment in the sun.

Giving each character "equal time" isn't easy. It's something I personally struggle with. Some characters naturally become more integral to the campaign than others. However, here's some good advice if you have underdeveloped characters: Ask the players to send you three things they would like to see happen in the campaign. Once you have their lists, take one idea from each player and work it into an upcoming adventure. Then ask yourself, "How might this affect that player's character?"

Lessons Learned

Static heroes do not a great campaign make. If you want your D&D campaign to thrive, its heroes need to evolve. Your more sophisticated players will demand it, but even players with a relatively shallow investment in the game don't like being treated as supporting characters or fifth wheels for very long.

For me, the greatest challenge of running a long campaign is keeping all of the players invested in what's happening. Toward that end, I try to keep the following in mind:

- **A campaign has an ensemble cast of heroes. Make sure they all get time in the spotlight, and keep the spotlight moving!**
- **Every character gets an arc, including the player who doesn't really crave one.**

Okay, enough about the heroes. Next week, let's embrace our "inner evil," talk about amazing campaign villains, and compare notes.

Until the next encounter!

The Dastardly Duo

4/7/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The characters, now 15th level, have reached the midpoint of the campaign. To celebrate this achievement, I decided to involve them in something truly world-shaking. The time had come to give them a flavor of evil they'd never tasted before.

Enter Kharl Mystrum and Nemencia Xandros.

Kharl and Nemencia have three qualities that make them stand out: First, like all truly evil villains, they believe that their actions are justified. Second, they're incredibly lucky. And third, like two sides of a coin, they can't really exist without one another.

If *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the TV series, not the loathsome movie) taught me anything, it's that two villains are better than one. It was proven in Season 2 with the vampires Spike and Drusilla, reaffirmed in Season 3 by Mayor Wilkins and Faith, and then sorely missed in subsequent seasons. (If you want to make a case for the "brilliant pairing" of Rutger Hauer and Paul Reubens in the *Buffy* movie, knock yourself out. Preferably with a sledgehammer.)

Like Spike and Dru, the "dastardly duo" in my Wednesday night campaign are lovers, which mostly serves as a plot device to explain why they're together

but also gives their relationship an added layer of realism and complexity—particularly when the cracks start to form. They're both human, born into noble families suffering under the tyranny of the dragon-born-dominated empire that rules most of Iomandra. Determined to shatter the imperial hold over their regency, Kharl and Nemencia have stolen their parents' fortunes to spend on a massive elemental citadel held aloft by a 1,000-foot-high cyclone of water. Once they've obtained the citadel, Kharl and Nemencia plan to wipe out the imperial fleet at Io'calioth and run roughshod over the island city. It might seem crazy in your campaign, but it fits perfectly into mine.

It's very easy to hate a pair of spoiled rich kids who want to trade their silver spoons for platinum, and blow obscene amounts of money because they feel trodden upon.

The heroes first become involved with them when they attend a secret auction of elemental weaponry; the last item up for grabs is the elemental citadel. It's here when the heroes meet Nemencia, who seems pretty harmless and out of her league . . . until she bids 25 million gp on the citadel in question. At that time, it's not clear what her intentions are—the players are initially led to believe she's representing her father, a powerful baron with a sterling reputation.

At the conclusion of the auction, Nemencia is more than happy to offer the heroes a tour of her new citadel, convinced that they share her disdain for the empire. However, it soon becomes clear that her intentions are far from noble. When the heroes try to wrest the crown from her, she crashes the citadel into the sea. Using a talisman obtained earlier in the campaign, the heroes travel back in time, effectively escaping a TPK. (Time travel: a fun if tricky plot device that I hope to discuss in a future article.) The heroes get a second shot, but instead of turning on Nemencia, they remain aboard the citadel and wait for an opportunity to betray her.

Before the heroes can act against Nemencia a second time, Kharl appears. That's when the heroes realize they're facing two villains, not one. The added complication is that Kharl is not alone: He's joined by a flight of mercenary dragons bribed into defending the citadel. What to do? The heroes first try to play the two lovers against one another; when that fails, they try to convince the dragon mercenaries to betray the lovers, and very nearly succeed. When Kharl finally becomes aware of their scheme, the battle's joined! As the citadel cuts a swath of destruction through Io'calioth's harbor, Kharl and Nemencia hold out for as long as possible before making their escape.

What makes Kharl and Nemencia especially memorable (apart from their countless flaws), is their longevity. Since the first fateful meeting, they've crossed paths with the heroes on three more occasions:

- **Weakened and wounded from their ordeal aboard the citadel, Kharl and Nemencia are captured by agents of the Dragovar empire. The heroes feel sorry enough for the lovers to extricate them from their predicament. Once out of harm's way, Kharl and Nemencia betray the heroes and nearly get them killed before escaping once again.**
- **The heroes learn that the Dragovar empire has posted a 2,000,000 gp bounty for the capture of Kharl and Nemencia. The heroes finally catch them aboard Kharl's ship, but when the vessel is overrun by githyanki pirates, the heroes are forced to surrender the lovers to save their own skins.**
- **After their vessel is destroyed by a Far Realm mine, the heroes seek another time-travel talisman to undo the sequence of events that caused their ship's destruction. They discover a drow NPC who has what they need, and also learn that the drow is conducting secret business with githyanki pirates. Once they learn that the pirates have released Kharl and Nemencia into the drow's custody, the vindictive (and somewhat more jaded) heroes hunt down and kill the two lovers out of spite, forcing the drow to use his time-travel talisman to undo the event. When they try again, the heroes discover that Kharl and Nemencia have been spirited away, and the talisman's power has been spent. The heroes' fleeting victory turns to bitter irony as their thirst for vengeance has cost them the very item they sought.**

Lessons Learned

The saga of Kharl and Nemencia isn't something I planned from the get-go. I fully expected them to be dead by now. Everything that's happened so far is the result of hundreds of decisions and dice rolls, combined with calculated efforts on my part to have them resurface in unexpected ways. They've become the archetypal two-headed villain of my Wednesday night campaign. At some point, I'll share with you another villainous archetype that's become the bane of my Monday night group . . . but that's another story!

The theme of "dastardly duo" appears frequently in literature, film, and TV. Partnered villains are better than singular villains for so many reasons: They act as mirrors for one another, they can be turned against one another, and they remind the players that villains also have relationships that can be explored and exploited. Perhaps most importantly, if one of them dies, the other can carry the torch.

Kharl and Nemencia have taught me three other important lessons worth mentioning here:

- **The best villains are like the heroes: They don't know everything, they make mistakes, and they have a knack for turning disadvantage into advantage.**
- **The best villains are the ones the players can interact with.**
- **If you want to keep your villains from getting killed, try making them more valuable alive than dead, or make the consequences of their deaths severe and readily apparent.**

Regarding the second point, there's an inherent risk that comes with giving heroes "face time" with your carefully crafted villains. More often than not, the villains will perish before achieving any true level of infamy, but for every nineteen that die before their time, there will be the twentieth villain in whom the gods show favor, the villain (or dastardly duo) that survives long enough to make the heroes' lives truly miserable.

Regarding the third point, imagine what would happen if my players suddenly learned that Kharl and Nemencia had become heroes of the people—symbols of unity among humans fighting for independence against the "ruthless" Dragovar empire? What would happen, I wonder, if the heroes murdered them in cold blood?

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

She Eats Babies!

4/14/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are mid-paragon tier and enjoying a love/hate relationship with a guild of tiefling thieves and cutthroats called the Horned Alliance. Over the course of several adventures, they've thwarted a major operation, killed several high-ranking members of the guild, and dealt the guild a severe financial blow. Now they find themselves in the cellar of The Dead Crow, a tavern in Io'calioth that serves as a front for the Horned Alliance, standing across the dining table from the guild's supreme leader: a grandmotherly tiefling named Dorethau Vadu. What better opportunity to bury the hatchet and let bygones be bygones—the heroes have other fish to fry, and so does the Horned Alliance. Enough blood has been shed, and neither side is eager to escalate the violence. More importantly, the heroes have information that Dorethau desires, and she has information useful to them.

Both sides agree to an information exchange. However, before the exchange begins, a servant places a covered platter in front of Dorethau. She rubs her fork and knife together expectantly as the platter lid is removed . . . revealing a cooked dragonborn baby.

The Monday night group was *horrified*.

To understand the point of this article, one must first understand the Horned Alliance. This tieflings-only club of miscreants and malefactors operates something like the Mafia—it wants to mind its own business (however criminal) and be left alone. That

said, the tieflings in my campaign are a shattered race; their empire was wiped out by the dragonborn empire, and in Dragovar society, most tieflings are regarded as third-class citizens.

Over the course of several levels, the heroes crossed swords with a number of Horned Alliance tieflings. There was Suffer, the brutal tiefling thug who spoke with a Brooklyn accent; there was Zaidi Arychosa, the aria singer and wealthy dilettante; there was Zaibon Krinvazh, who lived on a ship called the Hellstrike and collected the flayed bones of his adversaries; and there was Prismeus, Zaibon's crafty tiefling lieutenant with the acid-scarred face.

For the supreme leader of the Horned Alliance, I needed someone more memorable than all of these other tieflings combined—someone with the smarts, the temperament, and the prescience to run a widespread organization yet who also embodied the Horned Alliance's abject hatred toward the Dragovar Empire. Dorethau Vadu is old, wise, and not about to pick a fight with a bunch of people who slay monsters for a living. The Horned Alliance is her house, its members are her children and grandchildren (metaphorically speaking). She would be likeable and admirable except for one thing.

She eats babies.

This wasn't some randomly assigned fetish. It makes perfect sense in the context of the campaign; one thing the heroes know is that the Horned Alliance detests the ruling dragonborn empire, so how do I embody this hatred in the guild's leader? The answer is perfect in its awesome evilness: Dorethau Vadu employs thieves to kidnap dragonborn babies and then eats them! When the idea came to me, I was walking my dog in the woods. Reggie, my three-legged silky terrier, gave me a quizzical look when I shouted "She eats babies!" and immediately sent myself a text message so I wouldn't forget. (Like I'd forget something that cool!)

The juxtaposition of the grandmotherly figure with the image of the cooked baby told the players everything they needed to know about Dorethau Vadu—and at this point, the negotiations were over. The looks on my players' faces said it all: There was no doing business with this woman—she had to die.

As a DM, I sometimes make the mistake of relying too much on dialogue to make my villains compelling, but players are quick to dismiss evil monologues, insults, and hissed invectives. They're just words, after all. What my players remember about Dorethau Vadu aren't the words that came out of her mouth, but the baby that went into it.

Actions always speak louder than words.

Lessons Learned

I'm not suggesting that you add infanticide to your campaign as a means to shock your players. What worked for one villain in my campaign won't necessarily translate to villains in your campaign. The dragonborn baby stunt merely illustrates that the heroes need to see the villains do bad things in order to appreciate what they're up against. Simply knowing the bad guy is evil isn't thrilling enough.

There's a throwaway line spoken in the film *Quantum of Solace* to remind us that heroes, in large part, are judged by the strength of their enemies ("They say you're judged by the strength of your enemies"). Well, truth be told, everything I know about creating villains I learned from James Bond novels and films—and my villains' "strength" is determined by the extent they're remembered long after they're gone. For you, it might be the villain who "brands" his captives, the villain who betrayed one of his own to save himself, or the villain who wears a cloak made of the stitched faces of his slain enemies.

- **A villain needs only one good gimmick to be even vaguely memorable—be it a deformity, a white cat with a diamond collar, a razor-rimmed hat, or something equally obvious.**
- **Villains are defined by their deeds and quirks. It only takes one deed or quirk to make a lasting impression.**

Next week I'll present the winning entries from last week's BEST VILLAIN EVER! contest, and then we'll leave villains alone for a while to talk about what wonderful things can happen to a campaign when a player leaves the group.

Until the next encounter!

Best Villain Ever

4/21/2011

Normally I'd kick things off by describing some thrilling event or happenstance from my home campaign, but we're breaking format this week to bring you the three winning entries from the Best Villain Ever contest. Thanks to everyone who submitted an entry!

When I began analyzing why I liked these particular villains, I realized each one was a textbook example of a villainous archetype: There's the villain born out of the heroes' backstory, the villain hiding in the heroes' midst, and the good-aligned creature turned evil. Many of the contest entries fell into one of these three classic archetypes, though there were other archetypes represented as well: the world-destroying super-villain, the vengeance-driven villain, and the benefactor-turned-villain, just to name a few.

Are these three truly the best villains ever? That's ultimately for you to decide. I chose the villains that resonated with me personally; had you been the judge, you might've gravitated toward different things. However, all of the submissions did have one thing in common: Each villain was a deeply embedded element of the campaign, not just some disposable bad guy.

Dragen Blackstone, Warlock Knight of Vaasa

Here's an example of a villain the heroes are expected to despise from the get-go. Dragen's deeds are directly responsible for the situation in which they find themselves, and their reasons for hating him are hard-coded into their backgrounds.

I admire a DM who can pit the heroes against a villain far too powerful for them, allow the villain to prevail without ending the campaign, and offer players the promise of sweet, sweet revenge. Dragen doesn't need a black hat or a white cat to get the heroes' attention. The day the heroes finally meet Dragen on equal footing promises to be the high point in the campaign!

Also, the Warlock Knights of Vaasa are just plain cool.

DRAGEN BLACKSTONE, WARLOCK KNIGHT OF VAASA

My "Best Villain Ever" is from my home Forgotten Realms campaign. He is a Warlock Knight of Vaasa named Dragen Blackstone. The players crafted backstories for their characters, and a couple of them made up stories that involved their homes being destroyed when they children—but they weren't really specific about the regions they were from. I decided to make them from the mountains surrounding Vaasa and tied them together by the common thread that their villages were all destroyed by Dragen. Their first run-in with Dragen was while they were still very low level, and he knocked them unconscious and left them for dead, lying in the dirt. A wandering shaman (a new player joining the campaign) discovered them and healed their wounds. The shaman was also very familiar with Dragen—his tribe was constantly avoiding the Warlock Knights. My players will have many run-ins with Dragen's henchmen before they are powerful enough to get their revenge.

The best twist of the campaign is that one of my players thought he'd be clever and not create a backstory for his character. He told me his character woke up in the mountains with amnesia and has no recollection of his past. As the story unfolds, he will learn that he used to be one of Dragen's henchmen!

—Bill Buchalter
Indianapolis, IN

THE PORTER WHO MIGHT BE KING

The best villain we ever had in a game was a hired porter for the party. He was a kind, wiry old man who shared fatherly advice and told great stories around the campfire. The party loved him... until one night when the party uncovered a powerful artifact they had retrieved from a lich and decided to camp outside the dungeon immediately afterwards. In the darkest hour of night, offering to watch over the camp while the party slept, the kindly old porter killed the PC with the artifact while he slept and disappeared into the night. What they didn't know was that the old man was once a cruel king who had been dethroned at a younger age and now had a way to get back what once was his.

—Aaron Scott
Sioux Falls, SD

The Porter Who Might Be King

"Curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!"

The villain who lurks among the heroes is a great premise... difficult to pull off but incredibly gratifying when executed well (no pun intended). Sometimes a betrayal comes out of left field—usually when the idea occurs to the DM late in the game—but I think this one was planned from the very start, and that's awesome. Bravo!

I often tell new DMs not to drink from the "betrayal" well too often. You can't have NPCs betraying the heroes at every turn; it makes the players suspicious of everyone (best-case scenario) or just plain angry (worst-case scenario). I'm a big fan of the "villain in our midst," but if your players have been stung in the past, it's wise to drop a few clues before the big reveal. That way, when the players think you're screwing them over, you can point back at the clues and say, "Au contraire!" (or whatever they say in South Dakota).

Havok the Betrayer

I like challenging players' expectations, and a classic D&D example is the evil-aligned metallic dragon. This isn't a new idea, but it's often overlooked. My campaign includes a polymorphing silver dragon with evil ambitions; he's not nearly as capable or dangerous as Havok, and I confess that I've used him as comic relief on occasion (I recall a time when the dragon—as he was taunting the heroes with a villainous monologue—landed on a wooden platform that couldn't support his weight).

HAVOK THE BETRAYER

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—Aaron Scott
Sioux Falls, SD

Havok has the added virtue of being a monster as opposed to a two-armed, two-legged villain. Monsters are underused as major campaign villains, in my humble opinion. If a gold dragon can hold the heroes' interest for multiple levels or even tiers of play, imagine what could be done with an evil treant hell-bent on purging the natural world of civilization, an iron golem imbued with the sentience and ambition of its evil creator, or a beholder crime lord.

Havok the Betrayer rekindled my desire to flip through the *Monster Manual* in search of the next big bad guy in my campaign, and that's why he made the cut.

Lessons Learned

Would I pilfer these villains for my own campaign? You bet. A campaign can never have enough good villains—I truly believe that. Aside from their admirable characteristics, the Best Villain Ever contest winners reminded me of three important things:

- **Villains (even smart ones) make mistakes. Sometimes that includes not killing the heroes when they have the chance!**
- **Not every villain needs a world-shaking agenda to be cool.**
- **Villains come in all shapes and sizes.**

It's a bit of a digression, but Boraxe (one of our community members) has some wonderful DM advice embedded in his forum sig, which I'm paraphrasing here: *Dangle lots of plot hooks in front of your players. Anything they do not bite can come back and bite them later.* I think the same advice applies to campaign villains. You never know which villains will rattle the players' cages, so the trick is to keep inventing new ones.

Until the next encounter!

Man Down!

4/28/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

I was sad when Trevor Kidd, one of my players, told me he was leaving Wizards of the Coast—he was moving to Iowa to be closer to his wife, attending med school. Trevor's character, a dragonborn paladin named Rhasgar Vormund, had an amazing story arc tied closely to the events of the campaign, and I had big plans for him. Now all of my plans were suddenly dashed... which forced me to come up with a new, better plan that would allow Rhasgar to exit gracefully as well as propel the campaign and the other characters forward.

Here's everything you need to know about Rhasgar to understand the point of this article: He was born into the noble caste of Dragovar society, but his family was disgraced by powerful rivals (House Irizaxes and House Narakhty). Rhasgar ended up adopted by the Temple of Bahamut, while his younger brother Naxagoras ended up on the streets. Rhasgar became a dutiful servant of Bahamut and a sworn defender of the faith, eventually joining forces with the party in order to help the Dragovar Empire find its missing Emperor (as well as protect it from various looming threats). Once in a while, he crossed paths with Naxagoras, who had fallen in with a bad crowd and sworn a vow to Tiamat to avenge their family's disgrace. On multiple occasions, Naxagoras's thirst for revenge placed him and his brother in direct conflict with the two noble families responsible for their father's death and mother's suicide. Meanwhile, Rhasgar tried everything he could to persuade Naxagoras to abandon his oath to Tiamat.

Over the course of several levels, Rhasgar obtained a solid lead concerning the Emperor's whereabouts, but other quests (and his brother's antics) continually got in the way. Then a window of opportunity suddenly opened, and Rhasgar persuaded his companions to accompany him to the island of Nythe-Saleme, where the wreckage of the Emperor's flagship had been sighted. . . .

To the other players in the group, Trevor's character was the "friendly face" of the Dragovar Empire—an honorable dragonborn through and through. He reminded them that the empire wasn't as corrupt as the DM sometimes made it out to be. Trevor's departure not only meant the group was shrinking (from 8 to 7 players) but also that the party was losing its moral compass. And I was losing not only a great roleplayer but also a character whose ties to the Dragovar Empire fueled a lot of great storytelling.

When a player leaves the group on good terms, my DM skills are put to their greatest test, for it's my job to make sure the departing player's final session is an amazing, emotional experience for the whole group. In a long-running campaign such as mine, every player deserves an appropriately spectacular send-off—to deny a glorious finale would've been negligent and disappointing, and a good DM never leaves the players feeling disappointed.

In January, I co-hosted a DM seminar at **D&D Experience** in Fort Wayne, IN. One of the seminar attendees shared an anecdote from his campaign in which he had one player leave the group and another player join in the same session. In his final session, the departing player sacrificed his character to save the life of the new player's character. This simple act of heroism created a bond between the new character and the remaining party members, all of whom were touched by their comrade's noble sacrifice. I practically wept at the ingenuity of it, even though the outcome had been somewhat orchestrated by the DM and departing player.

I wanted something equally impactful. Due to forces beyond my control, I had only one game session to wrap up Rhasgar's story and plan a graceful exit. The day before the game, I made a list of all of Rhasgar's unresolved plot hooks and quests:

- **Find the Emperor and return him safely to the throne.**
- **Deal with House Irizaxes and House Narakhty.**
- **Reconcile with Naxagoras.**

All three of these quests were originally meant to carry Rhasgar through the epic tier, and I had spaced them out accordingly. I ended up discarding my original plans and instead focused on how I was going to tie up Rhasgar's story in 4 hours of game time. Shortly before the game, in a moment of subdued panic, I made a list of events that would happen during this farewell session:

- **The heroes find and rescue the Emperor and his entourage, who are trapped in stasis on the island of Nythe-Saleme.**
- **The heroes escort the Emperor back to the capital, and he rewards them. They are named "princes of the empire" and given parcels of land. They witness firsthand the impact of the Emperor's sudden, glorious return.**
- **Upon hearing of the wrongs inflicted upon Rhasgar's family, the Emperor awards Rhasgar the estates of his rivals and tasks him with bringing the Irizaxes and Narakhty leaders to justice. Rhasgar and Naxagoras confront their hated enemies, one of whom wields their father's sword. Retrieving the stolen sword is the symbolic gesture that finally unites the two brothers. Naxagoras's bloodlust is satisfied, and Rhasgar gains a powerful friend in the Emperor.**

Originally the Emperor wasn't on the island. However, I now decided to make him a prisoner of the island's overlords—a pair of wizards named Nythe and Saleme who used magic to disguise themselves as purple dragons. The sisters' political agenda is pure contrivance and beyond the scope of this article—what's important is that they live inside a flying citadel that, in the course of the evening, rose out of a volcanic caldera, flew across the open water, and plunged into the sea, nearly wiping out the entire party. (A mass fly spell cast by Rodney Thompson's character saved the day.)

At 9 PM, three hours into the game, I realized there wasn't enough time to run separate combat encounters with House Irizaxes and House Narakhty, so I decided on a whim that Kaphira Narakhty would execute her entire household and take her own life instead of allowing an enemy to spill her blood. Moreover, rather than allow her family's fortune to fall into Rhasgar's hands, she would use it to hire assassins to avenge her death. (Instead of posthumously hiring them, I suppose that makes it prehumously; in any case, how's that for setting up a future encounter?) That left Tyzaro Irizaxes. I don't usually let NPCs steal the limelight, but I did allow Rhasgar's brother to score the final blow against the evil dragonborn noble and reclaim his father's sword. As for Rhasgar, he decided to spare the life of Tyzaro's daughter, Taishan, and even allowed her to retain a small portion of her father's estate—one final noble act brilliantly improvised by Trevor in the moment.

Lessons Learned

Sometimes when a player leaves, the campaign stalls. The onus falls on the DM to make the most of it—to reassure the remaining players that the campaign will go on . . . and that it's still full of surprises!

As much as I'll miss Trevor, his departure has already propelled the Wednesday game forward. What will happen now that the Emperor has returned, I wonder? Will Kaphira Narakhty make good on her threat to avenge her family's destruction? How will the other players fare without their faithful moral compass? I see dark times ahead, but only time will tell.

Here's what Trevor's sudden departure taught me:

- **Nothing's more important to a campaign than the stories of the player characters.**
- **Improvisation is the key to survival—both for the DM and for the campaign.**

Next week I'll talk about maps, which I love, and share a few DM mapping tricks. The Best Villain Ever! contest was well received, so expect another in the not-too-distant future as well.

Until the next encounter!

Big Map Attack

5/5/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The Emperor of the Dragovar empire is missing! The heroes chase a lead to a small island dominated by an extinct volcano and populated by hill giants. The giants pay homage to the island's gold dragon overlord, Zeryndroth, even though the dragon was turned to stone many years ago.

The huge petrified dragon stands proudly atop a rocky outcropping south of the hill giant village, and every morning the giants leave a cornucopia of fresh food offerings at its feet. With Zeryndroth indisposed, a black dragon named Caustralanth has moved into seaside caves set into the northern cliffs of the volcano . . . but she's not yet powerful enough to impose her will upon the hill giants and assert herself as the island's new dragon overlord.

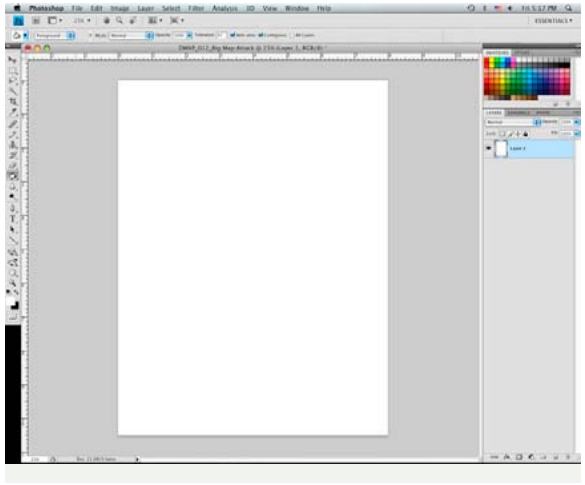
There's more to the island than meets the eye, as my players will soon discover. In order to find out what happened to the Emperor, the heroes will undoubtedly confront the hill giants, investigate the petrified remains of the dragon overlord, explore the hilltop cairns in the giants' cemetery, and perhaps even negotiate Caustralanth's caves to reach the volcano's caldera. With so many possibilities, I felt it was important to provide my players with a map—and how I build maps is the subject of this article.

My maps are not photorealistic; they're inspired by the works of David "Diesel" LaForce, a cartographer from TSR who did a lot of the early cartography for *Dungeon* magazine (not to mention several old TSR adventures). My maps tend to be very clean and utilitarian, but they also have an organic hand-drawn quality that mapmaking software has trouble emulating.

Sometimes I draw maps the old-fashioned way: freehand on graph paper. On this particular occasion, I'm using Adobe Photoshop CS4 and giving you an over-the-shoulder glimpse into my map-making process. This is not intended as a Photoshop tutorial, and I should warn you: I'm not a Photoshop whiz. However, you'd be amazed what you can do in Photoshop with just four tools: the **pencil**, the **eraser**, the **paint bucket**, and the **type tool**.

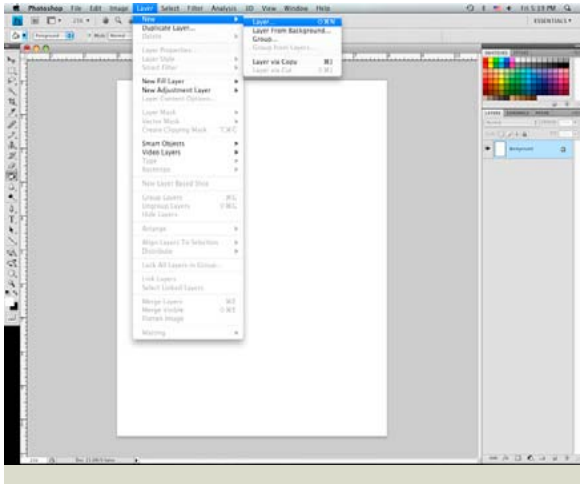
Step 1. Say Hello to Photoshop

I open a new file in Photoshop. This is my canvas, and I want to make sure the map fits on a single sheet of 8.5" x 11" paper. This map won't need a grid, so I use the **paint bucket** tool (left column) to paint the background white. It's like I'm starting with a fresh sheet of blank paper!



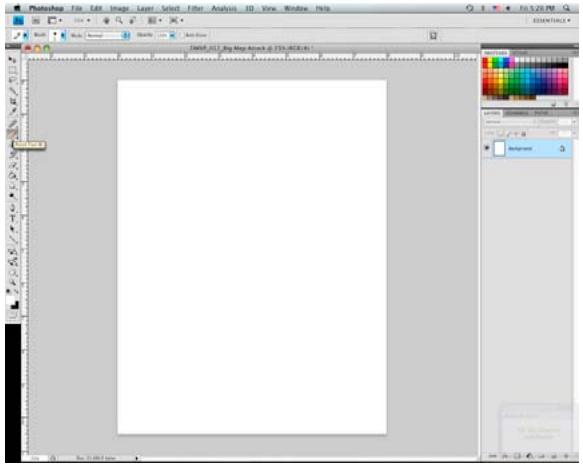
Step 2. Use Layers

I like to build my maps in layers. Each new map element I create gets its own layer. That way, if I need to make changes to one layer of the map, I can do so without affecting the other layers.



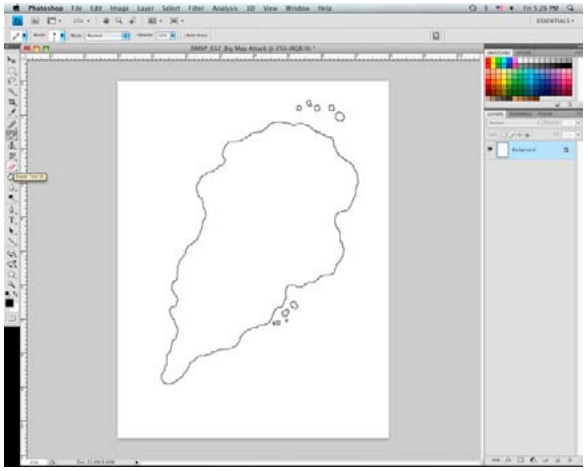
Step 3. Grab My Pencil

My **pencil** is embedded in the toolbar on the left side of my screen. Most of the map will be created using this simple hand-drawing tool.



Step 4. Draw, Erase, Draw, Erase

Using my mouse and the **pencil** tool, I draw a rough outline of the island on the Background layer. I've set the pencil width to 5 pixels, which has a nice line weight. Drawing with a mouse is hard; sometimes the lines don't look exactly right. So, I use the eraser tool



(in the left toolbar) to erase the sections that offend me, and then redraw those sections until I'm happy.

Step 5. Build the Volcano

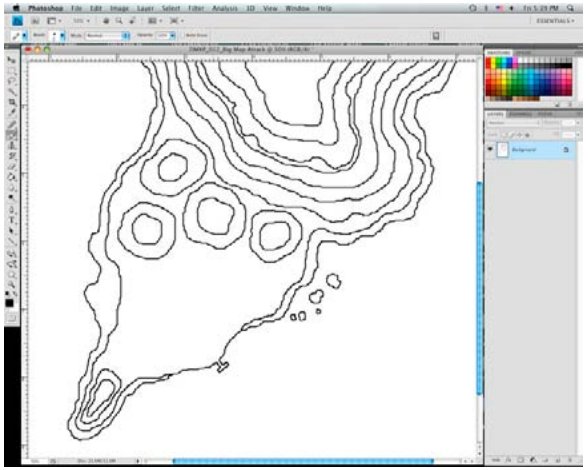
The volcano on the island will be represented by a series of concentric contour lines, each one representing an increase in elevation of 100 feet. These "rings" are drawn with the **pencil**. It's tedious work that will pay off later.

Step 6. Add Cliffs

Using my **pencil** and **eraser** tools, I carefully extend the 100-foot cliffs around the rest of the island, except for a short section to the south. I make sure there are no gaps in the linework, so that I don't run into problems when it comes time to paint sections of the map with color.

Step 7. Add Hills

This is an island inhabited by hill giants, so I figure it needs hills! I draw several low hills at the base of the volcano, as well as a rocky rise at the southern tip of the island where the petrified dragon is perched.

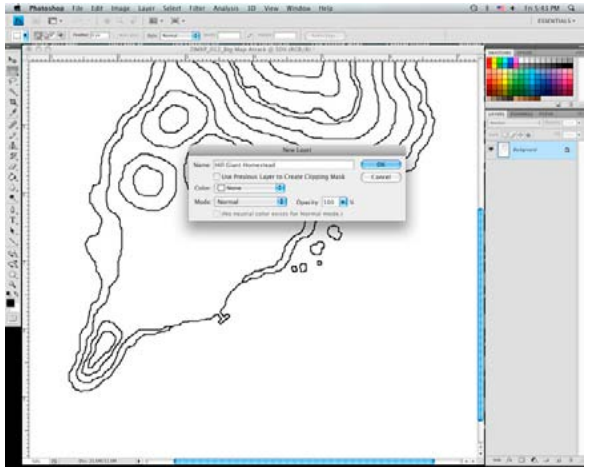


Step 8. Add a Dock

Using the **eraser**, I erase a small bit of the island outline. Then I use my **pencil** to draw a stone dock protruding from the island. If it doesn't look right the first time, I erase it and try again. Up to this point, everything has been drawn on one layer.

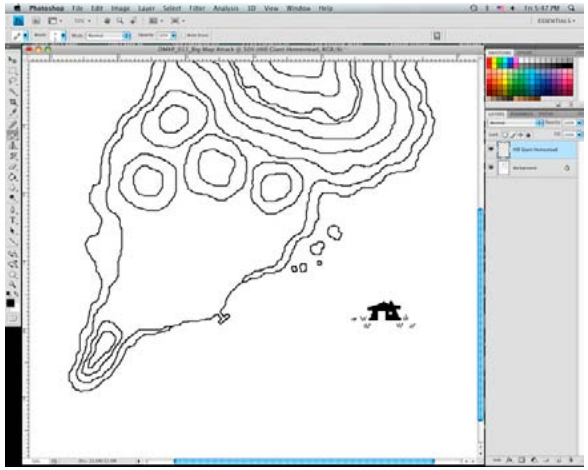
Step 9. Create a New Layer

I'm ready to start adding details to my map. I create a new layer and call it "Hill Giant Homestead."



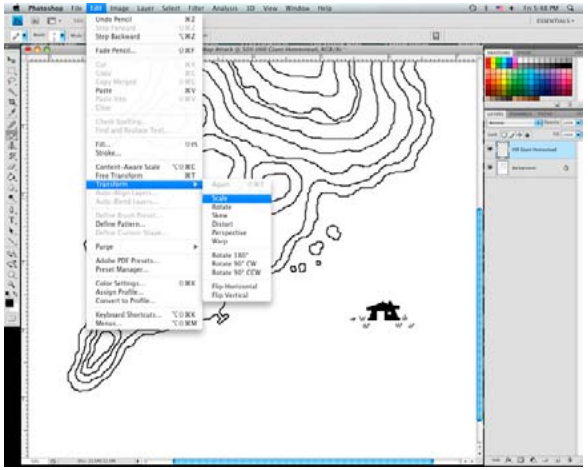
Step 10. Draw a House

My layers appear in the toolbar along the right side of the screen. Using my **pencil** and mouse, I draw a hill giant homestead anywhere on the map; because it's on a separate layer, nothing I do will affect the rest of the map. I draw the house bigger than it will appear in the final, so that I can get the detail I want. It looks like something the Flintstones might build, but which seems appropriate for a hill giant dwelling.



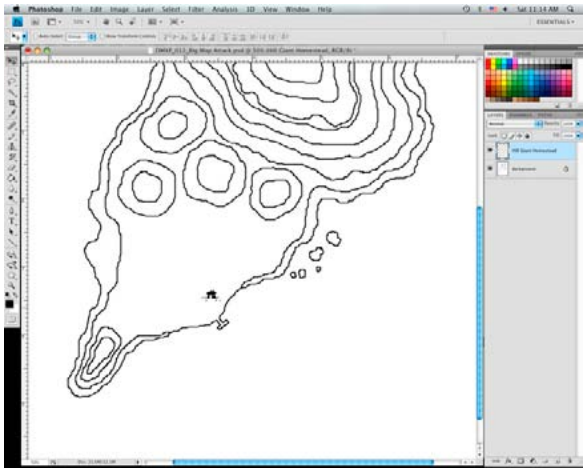
Step 11. Shrink the House

To shrink the hill giant house so that it's the appropriate size, I use Edit > Transform > Scale (as shown).



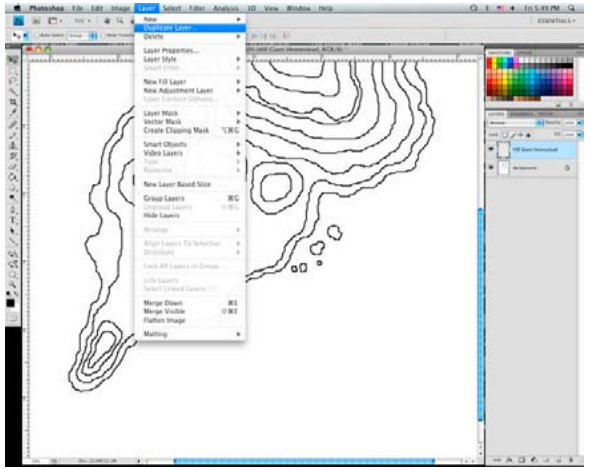
Step 12. Place the House

Using my mouse, I "click and drag" the resized house so that it's where I want it. I can do this because the house is on its own layer, separate from the rest of the map.



Step 13. Duplicate the House

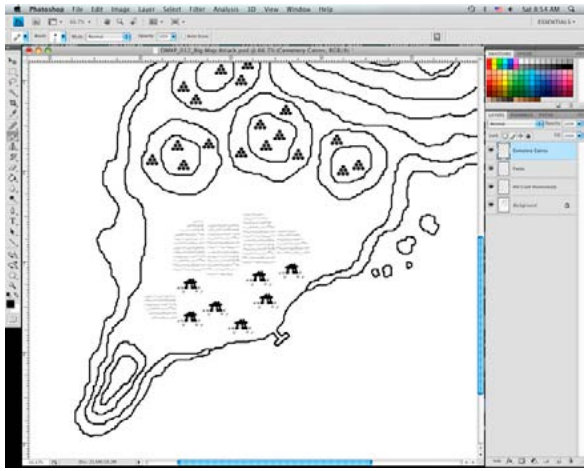
Because I'm lazy, I'm not going to draw different hill giant houses; I'm going to copy and paste the same one over and over using Layer > Duplicate Layer. Each time I duplicate the Hill Giant Homestead layer, I get a new house that I can "click and drag" wherever I want using my mouse.



Step 14. Make a Hill Giant Cemetery

The giants bury their dead under rocky hilltop cairns. The cairns are created exactly the same way as the giant homesteads: I create a new layer, build one cairn using my **pencil**, shrink it down to the appropriate size, duplicate the layer over and over, and "click and drag" each new cairn into place.

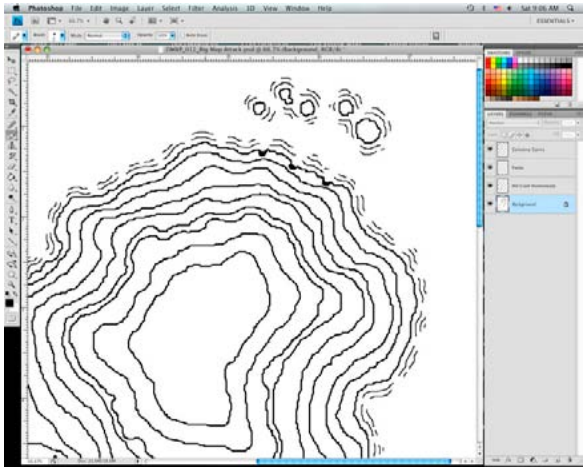
On a whim, I use the same trick to create farm fields around the hill giant homesteads. I create a new layer, draw five rows of wavy lines using my **pencil** (set to 1 pixel width), and then duplicate the layer multiple times. Once the lines are placed, I use my eraser to "cut the corners."



Step 15. Make Waves and Caves

Believe it or not, my map is 75% complete. Time to add some details, specifically a row of caves along the northern cliffs and some water lines around the entire island. I want to make these changes to the Background layer, so I make sure that's the layer I'm working on (see the right toolbar).

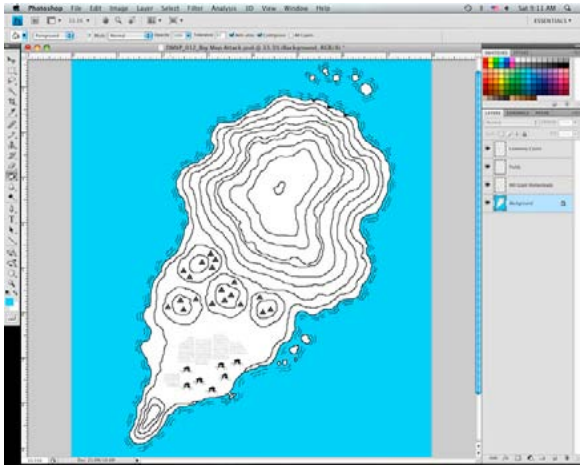
The waves and caves are made with my **pencil** (set at 3 pixels). The waves in particular look better if the linework is a bit thinner than the outline of the island.



Step 16. Just Add Water

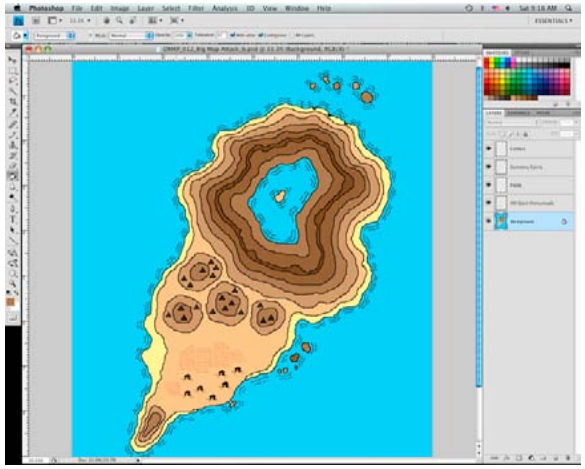
Before I apply color, I save my map. That way, if I screw something up, I have an unpainted version to revert to. My color palette is in the top right corner of my screen; I'm going to limit myself to the colors offered here.

I want to make sure I'm applying color to the correct layer (in this case, the Background layer). I select the shade of blue I want and use the **paint bucket** tool in the left toolbar to fill in the desired area. If there are any breaks in the outline of my island, the paint will flow into areas I don't want, so I'm careful to check my linework. If I use the **paint bucket** and the color doesn't fill the desired area, I can undo it (Edit > Undo, or Command-Z on my Mac) and try again.



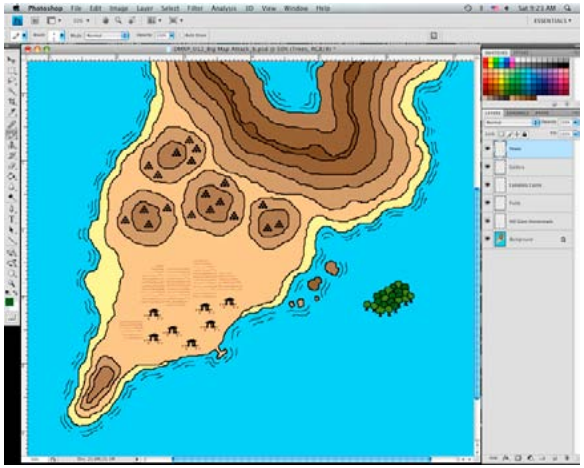
Step 17. Paint by Numbers

The **paint bucket** is a poor man's coloring tool, but it serves my needs. I select different shades of yellow, orange, and brown to represent the various elevations and then use the **paint bucket** to apply those colors to specific layers. For instance, the blue water in the caldera is on a different layer than the blue water surrounding the island.



Step 18. Add Pretty Little Trees

I forgot the trees! No problem—I create a new layer, then draw and paint the trees wherever I want on the map.



Step 19. Transform the Trees

I not only want to shrink and relocate the trees but also flip them horizontally, so that they fit in the specific area of the island I have in mind. Once again, I use Edit > Transform. The "horizontal flip" tool is an easy way to make your map elements feel less cookie-cutter. In the accompanying diagram, the two smaller stands of trees are basically two identical layers, one of which as been horizontally flipped!

Step 20. Build the Beach

I use the **pencil** tool (set at 1 pixel width) to make stipple marks along the western shore, giving it a sandy appearance. Then I create a new layer, use my pencil and **paint bucket** to draw one palm tree, duplicate that layer six times, and then use my mouse to move the seven palm trees where I want them.

Step 21. Add Elevation Tags

We're almost finished. Time to add text to the maps. To make the elevation clear to my players, I add text tags to the various elevation lines (+100 ft., +200 ft., and so on). To make the text more visible, I apply a "glow" around the text using Layer > Layer Style > Outer Glow. Not all of the text on the map needs this treatment, just the text that would be hard to read otherwise.

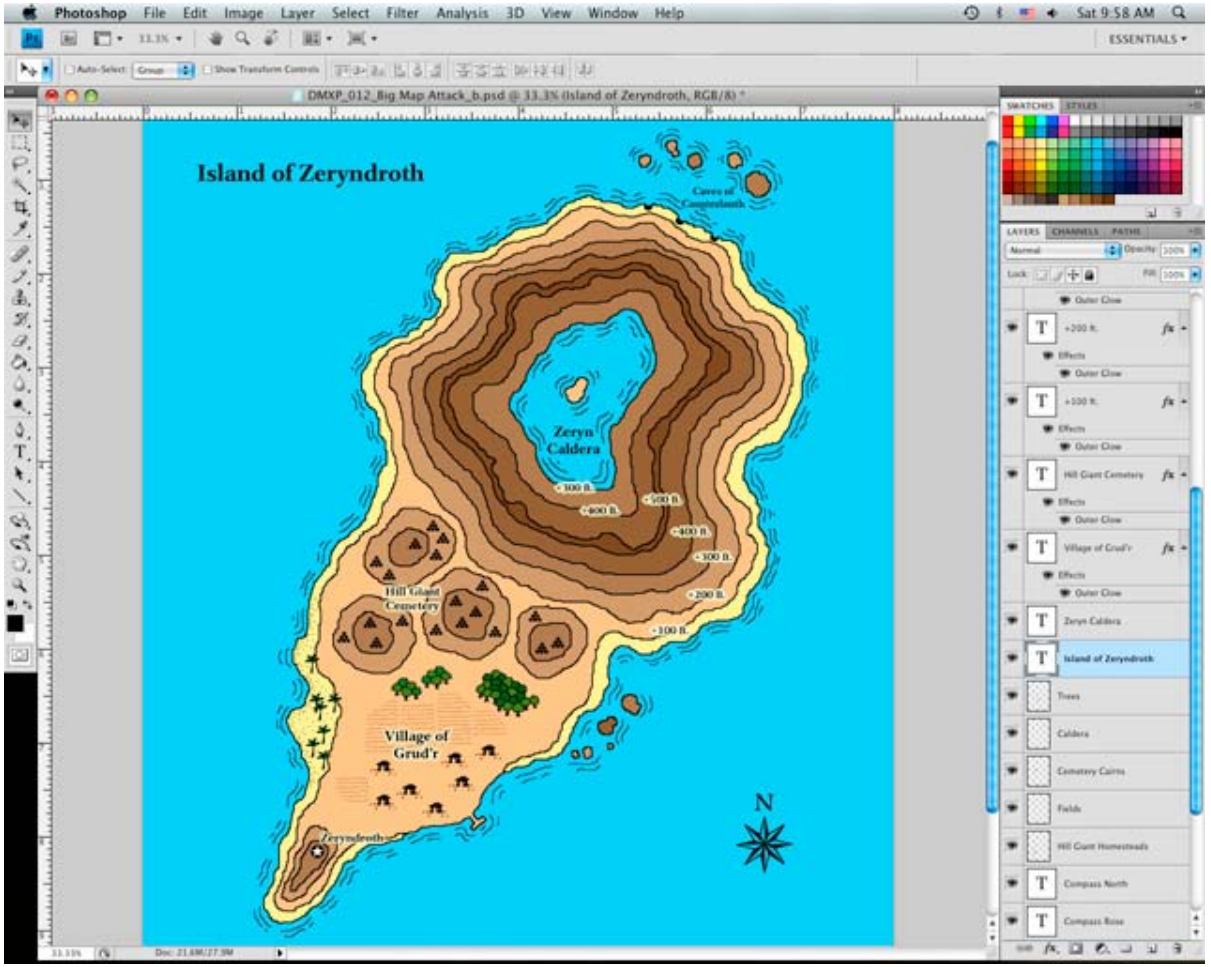
Step 22.
Save and Enjoy!

I use a traditional D&D statue icon to represent Zeryndroth, the petrified gold dragon. This symbol is part of the Zapf Dingbats font family, as is the star-like symbol I use for the compass rose. Like all of the tags, they're added to the map as separate layers using the type tool ("T") in the left toolbar.

With the tags in place, the map is complete. I save the file.

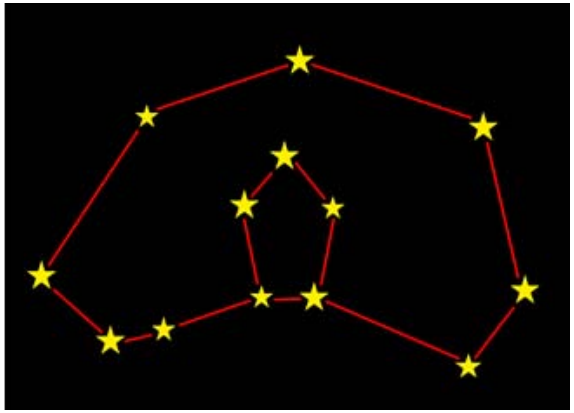
At some point, remind me to show you the tools I use to build maps for the ships that crop up in my nautical-themed campaign.

Until the next encounter!



Constellation of Madness

5/12/2011



MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes convene aboard their ship, the Maelstrom, before embarking on their next epic quest. That's when Melech, Bruce Cordell's character, notices something strange in the night sky: three unfamiliar stars peering just above the southwestern horizon.

In the days that follow, more strange stars come into view, until the entire constellation of thirteen is visible. The starry array resembles a dragon's eye, and the writings and ramblings of ancient mariners and astronomers speak of an evil constellation that appears only when summoned—a constellation with the power to warp the very fabric of reality. Some call it the Dragon's Eye. Others call it the end of the world.

Believing that an evil eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor has summoned the constellation for his own fell purposes, the heroes travel to the Dragovar capital. There, they confer with Lenkhor Krige, a dragonborn archmage who leads the Shan Qabal, a powerful sect within the arcane caste. Lenkhor is someone in whom the characters have placed their trust. Yet by the time they arrive, reality has been altered in such a way that the archmage is no longer around to help them. To further complicate matters, the heroes have no memory of ever meeting Lenkhor, which means my players must put all previous encounters with Lenkhor out of their minds.

Welcome to my weird world.

My campaign is like a snow globe. Sometimes it needs a good shake.

Buried in my original campaign notes is the following bit of lore: *Long ago, the world of Iomandra was home to a multitude of powerful dragon-sorcerers. Their mastery of magic made them undisputed rulers of the world. One by one they died, and with them their great magic. Present-day dragons, more driven to acquire gold and property than arcane power, believe these ancient wyrms ascended to the heavens, becoming the stars in the night sky.*

The above passage was the inspiration for an epic-level adventure called "Constellation of Madness," in which a major campaign villain with ties to the Far Realm summons a constellation that has the power to alter reality. What really excited me about this idea was the prospect of temporarily swapping players in my Monday and Wednesday night groups, and the Dragon's Eye constellation was the plot device I intended to use to make it happen. Unfortunately, my players' schedules made the swapping exercise impractical; however, I refused to abandon the alternate reality idea entirely. After twenty-three levels of adventuring, my players understood all too well how the world worked—so what better way to turn things upside-down and change some of the fundamental truths of the campaign!

From the outset, my campaign was built around the three-tiered structure of 4th Edition. The heroes spent the entire **heroic tier (levels 1-10)** exploring one small island and learning bits and pieces about the "larger world."

Paragon tier (levels 11-20) was all about leaving the island and exploring what the larger world had to offer. The heroes became embroiled in politics. They meddled in the affairs of others while chasing their own dreams. They got a ship and plied the Dragon Sea in search of new adventures. By the end of the paragon tier, they'd touched on every major campaign arc and understood the world pretty well.

Then came **epic tier (levels 21-30)**, during which one expects all of the major campaign arcs to wrap up. However, epic tier is more than just "the end of plots." It's also the perfect time to challenge the players' perceptions of the world, and turn the campaign on its head. Like the final season of a television series, anything can happen and nothing is sacred.

Keeping my players engaged for 20+ levels isn't easy. Hell, sometimes it's hard to keep myself engaged, let alone them! With the heroes halfway to 24th level, my players have grown accustomed to their characters and each other, and think they know all of my sly DM tricks. To keep things exciting, I must be willing to take some big-money risks and shock the players with unexpected twists.

You May Ask Yourself, Well, How Did I Get Here?

"Constellation of Madness" does just that—it throws the heroes into an alternate reality where certain things that used to be true no longer are. It creates weird situations in which the players become aware of something that their characters don't know—and that, my friends, is the definition of roleplaying. Case in point: One of the major campaign villains is a dragonborn wizard named Hahrzan. Throughout the paragon tier, the heroes clashed with Hahrzan on several occasions, even killing him twice before realizing he had a secret cloning lab. But in this new reality, he's leader of the Shan Qabal in place of Lenkhor Krige, and in this alternate reality, the characters and Hahrzan have never once fought each other.

My players hate Hahrzan, and they loathe the fact that he's risen to a position of power in this new reality, but their characters have no justifiable reason to attack him. To my players, I describe their characters' relationship to Hahrzan as "prickly and tense, but not hostile," and as much as the players want to slay him, there's really nothing for their characters to act on. Their only recourse is to accept this new reality... at least until their characters become aware that reality has been altered. How's that for an epic roleplaying challenge?

"Constellation of Madness" is all about my players knowing more than their epic-level characters. As the players figure out why certain things are changing and others are staying the same, no doubt some event will occur that lets their characters realize their world around them has changed... paving the way for the inevitable (and hopefully satisfying) confrontation with Starlord Evendor.

A few words of warning: While epic tier allows you to shift a well-established campaign in unexpected directions, you must be careful not to turn the campaign into something unrecognizable or unfamiliar to your players. They've invested too much time in the world to watch it mutate into something bizarre and unrecognizable. Moreover, alternate reality storylines aren't for everyone. Sure, it's a great way to bring back dead villains, but not all players are capable of handling the metagame implications of an alternate reality storyline. No matter how hard they roleplay, their characters always seem to know as much as the players do! Even my Monday night players—expert roleplayers all—can accept only so much metagame torture before their heads leap off their shoulders and fly screaming about the room.

Lessons Learned

The jury's still out on whether "Constellation of Madness" will go down as a high point of the Iomandra campaign or sink like a stone to the bottom of the Dragon Sea—I'll keep you posted. In any event, here's what the experience has taught me about epic-level play:

- **By the time they reach the epic tier, players think they know where your campaign is heading. Show them how wrong they are.**

Next week's column discusses the repercussions of last week's poll results. The votes are in, and things don't look good for Xanthum the gnome bard! To my credit, I rarely kill characters on a whim, but you'd be surprised how much I enjoy torturing them. As you'll find out next week, it's for the greater good.

Until the next encounter!

Post Mortem

5/19/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

This week's session kicks off with a quick recap of the previous week's game: The heroes assaulted the Black Candle, a stronghold of Vecna worshipers hidden in a demiplane that can only be accessed via a secret ritual. Fortunately Xanthum (Curt Gould's gnome bard) had mastered the ritual.

Unfortunately, the Vecnites—themselves masters of secret lore—were more than prepared for the party's arrival. The heroes quickly found themselves surrounded and fighting for their lives against evil wizards, assassins, cultists, shadow demons, and undead creatures that like to feast on healing surges. To make matters worse, the heroes had an unexpected run-in with an exarch of the Maimed Lord, who banished Xanthum the gnome bard to the Nine Hells.

In a recent poll, y'all voted to decide which character in my Wednesday night campaign should die next. The votes were tallied, and Xanthum the gnome bard "won" by a landslide. Perhaps it was fate, but even before we knew the final results of the poll, events of the campaign had already conspired against Xanthum. Curt Gould was forced to wait a whole week to find out whether Xanthum would return from the Nine Hells in one piece. His anxiety only grew once the poll results were tallied.

Fortunately for Curt, I'm not the sort of DM who kills characters solely based on poll results; honestly, my players are quite capable of killing off their characters, and sometimes each other, without my help. That said, I have been known to torture my players' characters from time to time.

Just ask Rodney Thompson.

Many levels ago, the Wednesday night heroes faced a similar situation where they attacked an elemental weapons foundry and found themselves overwhelmed. The characters were knocked out (except for Andrew Finch's character, who fled), branded as enemies of the Dragovar empire (and by "branded" I mean literally scarred with scorching-hot brands that marked them as criminals), and handed over to a ship full of privateers (and by "privateers" I mean pirates). Prior to the ship's departure, Rodney's character Vargas had one of his eyes gouged out and replaced with a magical one; the bad guys planned to use Vargas as a "mule" to deliver this magic item to a one-eyed pirate warlord locked away in an island prison.

In the course of the journey, with a little help from Andrew's character, the heroes managed to commandeer the ship and avoid incarceration. Yet the pain and mutilation inflicted upon Vargas would be the beginning of a new arc for that character, one that would carry Vargas through many levels and even tiers of play. Rodney seized upon the opportunity, transforming Vargas into an avenger dedicated to wiping out those who maimed him. The eye not only gave Rodney a new magic item to play with, but also a new enemy to look forward to: the aforementioned pirate warlord, who was recently released from prison and—not surprisingly—wanted his magic eye back.

A little pain goes a long way . . .

. . . which brings us back to poor Xanthum. After making Curt wait a whole week to learn the ultimate fate of his character, I took him aside at the start of the session and told him that upon arriving in the Nine Hells, Xanthum was taken prisoner by a covey of night hags, whereupon he became their favorite "plaything." After six years of torture and abuse (this being a PG-rated blog, I'll spare you the horrific details), Xanthum was returned to his companions at roughly the moment he was spirited away. Curt was stunned, to say the least, but his horror turned to elation—I'd just given him a campaign's worth of roleplaying material to work with. Xanthum, the "cheery sing-along gnome bard," would never be the same!

Alas, Xanthum died later in the session. Fortunately, he was carrying a potion of life, which another character poured down his throat in the nick of time. In what can only be described as a cruel twist of irony, we managed to make good on the poll results while also keeping Xanthum in the game.

It's also worth noting that one of the Vecnite assassins had a quiver stuffed with seven *crossbow bolts of slaying*—one bolt for each character in the party. (The Vecnites had plenty of time to study the heroes' weaknesses and craft these menacing magic items, so this didn't seem beyond the realm of reason.) Here are the stats I created for these busted items, in case you're curious:

Missile of Slaying **Level 30 Rare**

Inscribed in Supernal script upon the razor-sharp tip of this crimson-fletched arrow or crossbow bolt is the name of the creature it aims to kill.

Wondrous Item 125,000 gp

Property

Inscribed upon this missile is the name of a specific individual. If the missile hits the creature whose name is inscribed upon it, that creature drops to 0 hit points. If the creature doesn't die when reduced to 0 hit points, the creature must make a saving throw; if the save fails, the creature dies. Whether it hits or misses its intended target, the missile's magic is spent once the missile is shot.

Over the course of the evening, the assassin managed to fire off six of the seven bolts before he was slain. Thanks to a couple missed attacks, some successful saving throws, and another potion of life, no one died (at least not for long). Ironically, the only bolt that wasn't shot was the one with Xanthum's name on it.

Lessons Learned

Pain and death are part of the human condition, and until we experience them in some form or another, we cannot truly understand or appreciate what it means to be human. I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of books, comics, movies, and television series that use death and near-death experiences as catalysts for character development. In all forms of storytelling, pain and death fuel character development, and D&D is all about character development. Without it, pain and death are largely meaningless. When I hear DMs complain about the pointlessness of death in their D&D campaigns due to the preponderance of Raise Dead rituals and other "cheats," I wonder if maybe they're missing an important opportunity.

On the other hand, I'm also told that 4th Edition characters are hard to kill. I can accept that. It's particularly true if all they face week-in, week-out are encounters comparable to their level. For me, I like to give my player characters the full range, from easy to harrowing. While I don't believe it's the DM's job to kill characters, I do get a morbid kick out of watching my players scour their character sheets in sweaty desperation, looking for that one half-forgotten power or magic item to save their bacon. I often plan sessions in which the characters might (depending on their choices and actions) find themselves fighting more than one encounter's worth of opponents at once. I run a deadly game of D&D, and yet, more often than not, the heroes prevail. Desperation begets imagination, and when it comes to staying alive, my players can be very imaginative.

To summarize:

- **Never underestimate the death-defying desperation of player characters.**
- **Pain and death can trigger great character development.**

Those of you who follow the Penny Arcade podcasts know what I'm saying is true. The death of Aeofel (Wil Wheaton's character) at the end of the third series spawned an entire adventure built around his triumphant return. Ye gods, if you want to see character development at its finest, check out the PAX 2010 Celebrity Game podcast!

When a character dies, it's either a momentous event or a momentary inconvenience depending on the campaign. My goal as DM is to remind players that even in a world with Raise Dead rituals, pain and death can still serve as fodder for good character development. Scars, nightmares, the thirst for vengeance, the undying enmity of the Raven Queen—these are the types of things that can haunt characters for a long time and make them more fun and interesting to play. So, before you puncture the hearts of your player characters with arrows of slaying, try to remember that the goal isn't necessarily to kill them off, but rather to give them more reasons to live.

Until the next encounter!

Special Guest Star

5/26/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Paragon tier. The search for a lost artifact leads the heroes to a sunken citadel, within which they find an extradimensional vault. The vault holds many treasures and surprises, including its mysterious architect—an astral giant driven mad by the passing centuries. Attending him are two angels: an angel of Erathis named Mercion the Icereaver, and an angel of Moradin named Kharandar the Firehearted.

Rather than play all three NPCs myself, I invited two special guest stars (former colleagues visiting from out of town) to play the angels, namely Steven "Stan!" Brown and Owen K.C. Stephens.

In keeping with my tradition of treating the campaign as a television series, I'm pleased whenever I can get a "special guest star" to show up for a session or two, even though my gaming group is already quite large. It's a clever bit of stunt casting that can surprise and delight your players. I think it's refreshing to bring new faces into the group, and it gives the campaign a different energy as well as someone other than me for the regular players to interact with. It's also a good way to give friends who can't commit to joining the "regular cast" an opportunity to contribute to the campaign, if only fleetingly.

I started using "special guest stars" in my long running 3rd Edition campaign when I found myself in the enviable position of having more people interested in my game than seats at the table. I would include special guest stars whenever a player absence meant I had a spare chair, and they appeared often and with great success. (I use them less frequently now only because I'm so busy that I often don't remember what an awesome idea it would be to bring in a special guest star until I'm setting up for the game and cursing my shortsightedness . . . but by then, of course, it's usually too late.)

It does take some DM preparation to make sure everyone enjoys the "special guest star" experience. To prepare for the session with Stan and Owen, I typed up three paragraphs of background information for them to sink their teeth into . . . just enough for them to understand their characters' goals and motivations. If they weren't playing angels who'd spent the past several centuries trapped in an extradimensional vault, I might've also given them a brief summary of the campaign world, but in this case it actually served the characters of the angels better if their players knew very little about the "outside world."

Here's what Stan and Owen were told about Mercion and Kharandar:

Hundreds of years ago, Erathis (the god of civilization and invention) inspired the servants of Moradin (the god of creation and the forge) to build an extradimensional vault, within which was hidden the treasures of bygone empires. The vault's architect was an astral giant named Runor Everlast. After his work was complete, Runor decided to remain in the vault as its eternal guardian. Moradin and Erathis each appointed an angel to protect Runor and keep him company: Mercion the Icereaver, and Kharandar the Firehearted. Unfortunately for the angels, the astral giant has since lost his grip on reality.

Many years ago, a small band of githyanki infiltrated the vault by some means Runor could not ascertain. Fearing that the vault had a flaw in its design, Runor set about making "repairs." Despite his endless toiling, Runor still believes the vault's security has been compromised. Although the githyanki invaders were dispatched, the astral giant is prone to hallucinations and sees githyanki in his mind from time to time.

Mercion and Kharandar are obliged to protect Runor at all costs, even if the giant puts himself in harm's way. However, if Runor is slain, the angels are released from service and harbor no ill will toward Runor's slayers, and might even be persuaded to help them. Both are eager to return to the Astral Sea, but first they must find a way to escape from the vault. Runor occasionally speaks of a secret means of escape but always stops short of revealing the details.

Ultimately, the only things I felt Stan and Owen needed were (1) a reason to oppose the heroes, and (2) a reason to help the heroes. Realistically, they only have three hours to make these characters their own, and more detail wouldn't have added much to the fun of playing these offbeat roles. I also don't feel it's my place to tell them how to play their characters unless they ask for advice; experienced roleplayers will find something to latch onto. In this case, Stan and Owen gravitated toward the elemental nature of each angel: Mercion the Icereaver sounded cold and calculating, while Kharandar the Firehearted sounded loud and temperamental. I didn't tell Stan or Owen to play their characters that way; they made the call.

However, Stan and Owen were allowed to ask me questions to fill holes in their player knowledge. For example, at one point the heroes asked the angels for more information about the githyanki raiders; I then stepped into the discussion and revealed some crucial information, but only as much as I felt the angels would be comfortable sharing with the party based on how tight-lipped Stan and Owen were playing them.

In addition to the three paragraphs of background information, I gave Stan and Owen unique stat blocks for each angel, mostly because I enjoy designing 4th Edition monsters so much. I could've easily given them stats for any of the existing varieties of angels, but I wanted the angels to fill different combat roles, and I wanted to make sure they had a decent selection of combat options. Had these angels been designed for less experienced players, I probably would've cut the triggered action powers to make them a bit simpler. Anyway, feel free to plunder these for your home games:

Mercion, Angel of Erathis **Level 21 Elite Soldier**
Medium immortal humanoid (angel) XP 6,400

HP 392; **Bloodied** 196 **Initiative** +16
AC 37, **Fortitude** 33, **Reflex** 32, **Will** 34 **Perception** +19
Speed 6, fly 9
Immune fear; **Resist** 15 cold, 15 radiant
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1; **Healing Surges** 3

Traits

☼ **Negation Aura ✦ Aura** 1
Creatures in the aura lose their resistance to cold.

Angelic Presence
Attacks against Mercion take a -2 penalty until the angel is bloodied.

Standard Actions

⨺ **Icy Longsword** (cold, weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +26 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 14 cold damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).

⨺ **Double Attack ✦ At-Will**
Effect: Mercion uses *icy longsword* twice.

Move Actions

Freezing Teleport (cold, teleportation) **✦ Recharge** ⁙ ⁝⁝
Effect: Mercion teleports 5 squares. Any enemy adjacent to Mercion after he teleports takes 15 cold damage and is immobilized (save ends).

Triggered Actions

Bitter Rebuke (cold) **✦ At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy damages Mercion.
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The triggering enemy takes 15 cold damage.

Skills Diplomacy +22, Insight +10, Intimidate +22, Religion +18
Str 22 (+16) **Dex** 20 (+15) **Wis** 18 (+14)
Con 20 (+15) **Int** 16 (+13) **Cha** 25 (+17)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Supernal
Equipment longsword

Kharandar, Angel of Moradin **Level 21 Elite Brute**
Medium immortal humanoid (angel) XP 6,400

HP 490; **Bloodied** 245 **Initiative** +14
AC 33, **Fortitude** 33, **Reflex** 30, **Will** 32 **Perception** +19
Speed 6, fly 9
Immune fear; **Resist** 15 fire, 15 radiant
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1; **Healing Surges** 3

Traits

☼ **Negation Aura ✦ Aura** 1
Creatures in the aura lose their resistance to fire.

Angelic Presence
Attacks against Kharandar take a -2 penalty until the angel is bloodied.

Standard Actions

⨺ **Flaming Longsword** (fire, weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +26 vs. AC
Hit: 4d8 + 18 fire damage.
Miss: Half damage.

⨺ **Double Attack ✦ At-Will**
Effect: Mercion uses *flaming longsword* twice.

Vortex of Fire (fire, zone) **✦ Recharge** ⁝⁝
Attack: Close burst 1 (creatures in the burst); +24 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 4d10 + 17 fire damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: This power creates a zone of fire that lasts until the start of Kharandar's next turn. The zone remains centered on Kharandar and moves with him. Any creature that starts its turn in the zone takes 15 fire damage.

Triggered Actions

Fiery Rebuke (fire) **✦ At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy damages Kharandar.
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The triggering enemy takes 15 fire damage.

Skills Diplomacy +21, Dungeoneering +18, Intimidate +21, Religion +18
Str 22 (+16) **Dex** 19 (+14) **Wis** 19 (+14)
Con 25 (+17) **Int** 16 (+13) **Cha** 23 (+16)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Dwarven, Supernal
Equipment longsword

Lessons Learned

Although they aren't part of the regular cast, "special guest stars" hold a special place in my heart, and I never use them as frequently as I'd like. Still, whenever they show up, my players take special interest in the session's events, thinking that maybe something big is afoot. Also, the new arrivals usually put my players on their best behavior. To their credit my players always try to make the special guest stars as comfortable as possible, even if they're playing villains.

My players understand the reason behind including special guest stars, and that's to make the campaign experience more surprising and fun for everyone involved. (That reminds me of a related story concerning David Noonan, who joined my 3rd Edition campaign as a "regular player" for a few sessions before his character royally screwed the party. Dave and I were the only ones who knew he wasn't, in fact, making a long-term commitment to the campaign, and his character's sudden betrayal left many lasting scars. You can't really pull that trick more than once before players start to look at each other suspiciously.)

There's no formula for knowing when to include a special guest star. My rule is: whenever conceivable, but not so often that it becomes the norm. Unlike a TV show, it doesn't cost any extra money to bring in extra talent, and it often makes my job easier as a DM because the players aren't just reacting to me all evening. (That said, remember that too much of a good thing can be poisonous.) All you need is someone willing to play for a session or two, and an NPC, party companion or other character for them to take over and make their own.

A couple things to keep in mind about special guest stars in your campaign:

- **A good special guest star is like the tiny umbrella in a piña colada—a fun little element to surprise and delight . . . or to give your campaign a bit of a stir.**
- **If you want your special guest stars to have a good time, provide only the essential information they need to play their roles effectively, then give them the same freedom you give your regular cast of players to play their characters as they will.**

Until the next encounter!

Popcorn

6/2/11

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Early in the campaign, on the island of Kheth, the heroes destroyed a cursed cauldron hidden deep inside an underground temple. This act triggered a curse that caused the dead to rise all across the island. The shambling horde chased the heroes back to the fortified village of Tyrak'n, where they made their final stand. I drew a map of the village's palisade wall on a wet-erase battle map, and beyond this wall I arrayed a legion of D&D miniatures—skeletons and other undead critters. There must've been at least fifty of them.

Many levels later, the village of Tyrak'n was again threatened, this time by goblins hiding out in the Feywild. The goblins were using a ritual to create a fey crossing, allowing them to surreptitiously invade the village without having to breach the palisades. When the heroes caught wind of the goblins' scheme, they ventured to the Feywild and assaulted the goblin stockade, which was filled to the brim with nearly one hundred of the villainous little buggers (as well as a few dozen hobgoblins and bugbears).

When it comes to throwing monsters at my players, the more the merrier.

I love minions. To me, they're like popcorn. I can't get enough of them. Every now and then, I dive into my collection of pre-painted plastic minis and sort them into armies that I can, at some future point, throw against my players. Skeletons. Goblins. Gnolls. Orcs. Ogres. Yuan-ti. Githyanki. Giants. Minions come in all shapes and sizes.

The 1 hit point minion is one of 4th Edition's great contributions to the D&D legacy. Minions are fun for the players insofar as they provide instant gratification; all it takes is one good sword swing or one magic missile to drop a minion, while a good area-of-effect power might annihilate an entire group of them in one fell swoop. They're a godsend to the DM, who doesn't need to waste time tracking hit points.

The *Dungeon Master's Guide* has a simple formula for the power level of a minion compared to a standard monster. I say forget the math! When a battle calls for minions, give the players everything you've got. And I mean everything. What's the worst that could happen? I'll tell you: The heroes might be overwhelmed and defeated. In my campaign, that's never a showstopper. If you're the type of DM who sees this potential outcome as an opportunity and not a campaign-ender, then you'll probably agree with me that you can never have too many minions. Give the players the fight they've been hankering for all week, and let the popcorn fall where it may.

Don't get me wrong: Sometimes it makes sense to include only a handful of minions in an encounter. What I'm referring to are those momentous occasions when you want to impress and terrify your players with what they're up against. When an enemy has the advantage of sheer numbers, players start to think twice about their conventional monster-slaying tactics; true, a wizard's fireball can kill twenty minions as easily as one, but if that still leaves twenty more minions on the table, the heroes could find themselves in serious trouble. They might even be forced to retreat or (gasp!) surrender.

When I build encounters, I balance them without factoring minions into the mix. That's not in keeping with the rules as written, but the DM has license to break the rules (as long as he or she does so fairly, consistently, and openly). Depending on how the minions are arrayed and when they show up has a lot to do with their effectiveness on the battlefield. If they're neatly arrayed in tight clusters for all the heroes to see, the wizard will make sure they're not around very long. On the other hand, if they're spread out, or if they only appear when certain conditions arise, they can truly change the complexion of the battlefield and force the players to reconsider their tactics. For example, I sometimes keep minions in reserve until the bad guy summons them, and I often keep extras behind my DM screen in case the player characters are having too easy a time.

Lessons Learned

When I think of minions, I think of the big fight scenes in all three films of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. For some reason, the image of Aragorn fighting orcs always springs to mind, and I think to myself, "I will never get tired of watching Aragorn kill orcs." Most

of my players are the same way: They long to play out battles against seemingly overwhelming numbers of foes and watch their heroes carve and blast their way through enemy lines.

- **Wading through waves of minions makes the heroes feel like heroes.**
- **Minions in large numbers terrify and excite the players.**

Although minions come with specified XP values, it's ultimately up to the DM to decide how much XP the characters receive for defeating them (and don't let any rulebook tell you otherwise). I tend to "ad hoc" the XP awards for minions. If the minions prove to be instrumental, then I might award full XP for them. On the other hand, if the minions aren't terribly effective, I might award none.

If you follow my advice and start bombarding your players with veritable armies of minions, be advised that the goal should not be to annihilate the party. If that's your objective, it's a lot simpler just to drop an asteroid on them and be done with it. No, your goal as the DM is to entertain the players by creating in-game situations that are perilous and fun, and minions are merely tools toward that end. If the heroes start dropping like flies, consider that the bad guys might stabilize them and take them prisoner. Many great adventures begin with just such a setback or defeat.

Until the next encounter!

The Wyrmworn Experiment

6/9/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Jeremy Crawford plays a human wizard named Alex, who began the campaign as an orphan shipwrecked on the backwater island of Kheth. There, he studied the magical arts under the tutelage of an eladrin recluse.

In the first episode of the campaign, Alex came face-to-face with Serusa, a dragonborn wizard in the service of the Shan Qabal (an imperial sect of wizards dedicated to magical research). Little did Alex realize that Serusa had come to the island to kill him.

In due course, Alex learned that he and several other children were part of a magical experiment in which the spirits of mighty dragon-sorcerers were bound within them. In a story inspired by The Manchurian Candidate, Alex and the other children—dubbed the Wyrmworn—were to be used as weapons against the enemies of the Dragovar Empire. However, a change in the political landscape resulted in the sudden termination of the project. The Shan Qabal then sought to eliminate all of the Wyrmworn, quietly and without fuss, but opposing forces managed to smuggle several of the children to safety aboard two merchant ships. The ship bearing Alex and several other children was lost in a storm and presumed destroyed. It took the Shan Qabal fifteen years to learn there were survivors.

By the time he hit paragon tier, Alex was exploring the world with his adventuring companions, and Serusa was nothing more than XP in the bank. As happens with many orphans in fiction, however, Alex discovered he wasn't an orphan after all. His father, Vincent van Hyden, was discovered to be an influential member of a worldwide trade consortium. From his father, Alex learned that he'd been given over to the Shan Qabal willingly, in exchange for money and the promise of power. Like everyone else, Vincent presumed his son had been lost at sea and spent years wallowing in fatherly guilt. After making amends with his father and tired of the sect's constant attempts to end his life, Alex took it upon himself to confront the leader of the Shan Qabal: Lenkhor Krige.

Lenkhor was an ancient, bedridden dragonborn archmage clinging to life by means of a magical crystal acting as a life support system. To his surprise, Alex learned that Lenkhor was the one who secretly arranged for the Wyrmworn children to be smuggled to safety, for he could not bear to see his handiwork destroyed. Taking fatherly pride in Alex's many accomplishments, Lenkhor also offered to help the young wizard contend with Hahrzan, Lenkhor's apprentice and political rival. Alex comes to learn that Hahrzan not only despises Lenkhor and seeks to wrest control of the Shan Qabal, but also conspires to destroy his master's legacy. Thus Hahrzan, it turns out, is behind the attempts on Alex's life.

Anticipating a confrontation with Hahrzan, Lenkhor tells Alex how to awaken his dragon spirit, believing him powerful enough to control it, but so far Alex hasn't dared do so. Alex has witnessed others like him dominated or destroyed by their awakened dragon spirits, and it remains to be seen whether he has the will and fortitude to do what no other Wyrmworn has been able to. Maybe awakening the dragon is part of his epic destiny. . . .

The Wyrmworn Experiment was something I dreamed up at the start of the campaign. The seed of the idea was a simple character background: one or more characters are survivors of a shipwreck. Of the eight players in my Monday night group, only Jeremy Crawford selected this background. As I began plotting out the first few adventures, I started to contemplate the cause of the shipwreck and eventually settled on a magical storm. I surmised that the storm was a deliberate attack on the ship, but why would someone want the ship destroyed? I made the logical leap that maybe, just maybe, the ship was transporting something dangerous to the Dragovar Empire... something that had to be destroyed at all costs.

For the sake of good drama, this clearly had to be Alex.

When Jeremy chose "shipwrecked orphan" as the hook for his character, he didn't know anything about the Wyrmworn Experiment. His character didn't even have a last name. These are elements I concocted and doled out over the course of many levels. I'd be lying to you if I said I knew the full extent of Alex's story from the very beginning, or how the various facts would come to light. As happens, a lot of Alex's story was dreamt up along the way. But from the outset, I knew three things were true:

- **Alex survived a shipwreck as an infant and knew nothing about his parents. (This information I got from Jeremy during character creation.)**
- **Alex and several other children were turned over to a group of dragonborn wizards, who bound the spirits of ancient dragon sorcerers within them.**
- **Ironically, the same wizards who bound the dragon spirit in Alex were now trying to kill him.**

The truth about Alex's father and Lenkhor Krige (whose last name I stole from the wonderfully alluring actress Alice Krige) came much later, whenever something would happen in the game that drove home the need to give Alex's story a forward push. The decision to make Lenkhor a sympathetic character was a spontaneous decision that happened in the middle of a session, when it occurred to me how cool it would be to give Alex two father figures, each repentant for different reasons: his conniving biological father who gave him away, and the dragonborn archmage who made him into the man he's become. Also, I was wary of the "evil archmage" cliché and wanted the leader of the Shan Qabal to be something unique and unexpected.

The heroes stormed into Lenkhor's tower expecting a big fight, and what they got was a withered husk of a mighty archwizard lying on his deathbed. The image of a figure who was simultaneously powerful and weak appealed to me, as did the idea that Lenkhor would do anything—magical and otherwise—to prolong his life, if only to aggravate his apprentice.

For Jeremy, who enjoys a good roleplaying challenge, it was an opportunity for Alex to confront the architect of the Wyrmworn Experiment and realize he's not dealing with a monster but a wizard whose lifelong quest for knowledge and power matched his own. This decision to portray Lenkhor as something other than a threat also opened the door to the possibility of Alex becoming a member of the Shan Qabal, which is basically what happened at the end of the paragon tier.

Lessons Learned

I've been watching *Mad Men* on DVD. It's another one of those ensemble shows I like so much, where every character receives a measure of growth and development. (Sounds like my D&D campaign!) As is typical for me, I'll watch an episode and then immediately watch it again with the commentary track, and what occurs to me over and over is that the show's writers and creators don't map out everything from the beginning. They give the actors just enough understanding of their characters to be effective in their roles, put them in dramatic situations, and then watch and see what happens. As each character's story comes into focus, the writers add new layers of complexity. They pay attention to what the actor does and give the actor new things to play with. Along the way, they look for surprises... and sometimes the things they thought were true in the beginning turn out to be false, or—better yet—lead to deeper truths.

The Wyrmworn Experiment is an example of an evolving character arc. It starts with something simple ("Your character is a shipwrecked orphan") and grows into something epic ("Your character was sold to dragonborn wizards and transformed into a

vessel for a mighty dragon spirit that the Dragovar Empire intended to unleash as a weapon against its enemies"). It's a difficult thing to pull off for every character, and frankly, not all players are hankering for something so intricate. For the invested roleplayers in your group, you can develop similar character arcs by asking two questions at any point in the lifespan of your campaign:

- **What's true about the character?**
- **What's really true about the character?**

Alex is an orphan (no, he's not). The Shan Qabal is trying to kill him (yes and no). He has the spirit of a dragon-sorcerer locked inside him (absolutely true, but maybe that's not such a bad thing after all).

Not all characters have or need as much built-in mystery as Alex van Hyden. Consider another character from my Monday night game: Matt Sernett's character, Bartho, began the campaign as a "local yokel," a dull-witted youth who fishes all day and drinks all night. All we knew about Bartho (and all there was to know about Bartho!) was that he wasn't particularly bright, and that he was taught how to fish by his uncle, who also happens to be the village drunk.

When a character is bereft of mystery, it's incumbent upon the DM to get creative and look at all of the elements that make the character what he is, including influential NPCs. Why is Bartho being raised by his uncle? Who is his uncle, really? Maybe the "village drunk" is a role he plays to divert suspicion. Maybe there's more to Bartho's uncle than meets the eye. In fact, what if he's secretly an agent for the Knights of Ardyn, a radical group led by a politically motivated silver dragon who seeks to overthrow the corrupt Dragovar Empire? What if the uncle realizes that Bartho might make a great fighter someday and gives the lad a gift—a silver dagger that the Knights carry around to identify one another? Maybe one day Bartho will find himself in a Dragovar settlement, innocently skinning an apple with his uncle's knife, when someone familiar with the emblem takes notice. It might lead to Bartho's first brush with the Knights of Ardyn... or the Dragovar secret police. The possibilities alone make me smile and clap my hands like a schoolboy.

Next week we'll check out the winners of the Magnificent Minion contest.

Until the next encounter!

Magnificent Minions

6/16/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Nacime's regular character is a defective warforged named Fleet. Several sessions ago, a group of Vecna-worshiping wizards abducted Fleet with the intention of dismantling and studying him. Fleet's sudden and somewhat unexpected disappearance afforded Nacime the chance to roll up a new character and try something different for few sessions.

Recently, however, the heroes located and stormed the Vecnites' secret lair and rescued Fleet from his captors. (Now Nacime has two characters, which presents a different sort of challenge.)

To get to the main bad guys, the heroes had to carve through Vecna's disciples, which included plenty of minions. The disciples' main "shtick" was that they uttered a terrible curse when killed. The curse made whoever killed them temporarily vulnerable to necrotic damage, which—as you might imagine—is particularly troublesome when fighting agents of the undead god of secrets.

Here's the stat block I created for the disciples of Vecna, which you're free to plunder for your home campaign:

Masked Disciple of Vecna **Level 23 Minion Brute**
Medium natural humanoid, human XP 1,275

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +11
AC 35, **Fortitude** 36, **Reflex** 35, **Will** 34 **Perception** +14
Speed 6

Standard Actions

Staff (necrotic, weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +28 vs. AC
Hit: 15 necrotic damage, and the target cannot spend healing surges until the start of the disciple's next turn.

Stolen Secrets (psychic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +26 vs. Will
Hit: 15 psychic damage, and the target cannot use encounter or daily powers (save ends).

Triggered Actions

Curse of the Whispered One ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy's attack drops the disciple to 0 hit points.
Effect: The triggering enemy gains vulnerable 10 necrotic until the end of the encounter.

Str 15 (+13) **Dex** 11 (+11) **Wis** 17 (+14)
Con 20 (+16) **Int** 18 (+15) **Cha** 15 (+13)

Alignment evil **Languages** Common
Equipment staff, skull mask

Because of their *curse of the Whispered One* power, these minion cultists are best combined with undead creatures that deal necrotic damage. Nothing says "*bwah-haha*" better than a minion who keeps dealin' the damage long after it's dead! Of course, once my players realized that the curse's effects don't stack, they got smart and let one character focus on taking out the minions so that the rest of them wouldn't be cursed.

"Magnificent Minion" Contest

Thanks to everyone who submitted minion ideas and stat blocks for the "Magnificent Minion!" contest. Not surprisingly, we received a ton of fun and wacky ideas, with brutes and skirmishers by far the most popular monster roles represented. (Not a whole lot of love for artillery and lurkers, however.)

I've picked my three favorites and have a few things to say about each one. A cautionary note: No real effort has been made to develop or edit these monsters. In a couple cases, I made some formatting changes and filled in some accidental omissions, but that's it.

Blood of Torog

By Chris C., U.S.A.F. Academy CO

Torog is the god of imprisonment, torture, and the Underdark. This particular critter likes to crawl inside your body, mingle with your blood, and control

Blood of Torog	**Level 10 Minion Skirmisher**
Medium immortal animate (ooze)	XP 125
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.	**Initiative** +11
AC 24, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 17	**Perception** +10
Speed 6, climb 6	Blindsight 10

Traits

☼ **Essence Drain** (necrotic) ✦ **Aura** 1
An enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes 2 necrotic damage.

Ooze
While squeezing, the blood of Torog moves at full speed rather than half speed, it doesn't take a -5 penalty to attack rolls, and it doesn't grant combat advantage for squeezing.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Slam** (necrotic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +15 vs. AC
Hit: 6 necrotic damage, and the blood of Torog can shift 1 square and pull the target into the space it just vacated.

⸸ **Invade the Blood** (healing, necrotic) ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: The blood of Torog shifts a number of squares equal to its speed and must end its move adjacent to a bloodied enemy.
Attack: Melee 1 (one bloodied creature); +13 vs. Reflex
Hit: The blood of Torog grabs the target (escape DC 18). Until it escapes the grab, the target takes ongoing necrotic damage equal to its level. If this damage reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target regains hit points equal to its bloodied value and is dominated (no save), and the blood of Torog is removed from play. While dominated, the target acts in accordance with the blood of Torog's wishes. When the dominated target drops to 0 hit points, it is no longer dominated or grabbed, and the blood of Torog appears in a square adjacent to the target.

Minor Actions

Change Shape (polymorph) ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The blood of Torog can assume the form of any creature it kills, though it appears tortured and mutilated. While in this form, it loses the ooze trait.

Skills Stealth +14

Str 10 (+5)	**Dex** 18 (+9)	**Wis** 10 (+5)
Con 16 (+8)	**Int** 10 (+5)	**Cha** 10 (+5)

Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** –

you like a meat puppet. *Invade the blood* is a fairly complex power for a minion, but undeniably scary.

I might change the encounter power to a "recharge when the attack misses" power (just to make it even scarier), and while its basic attack damage might seem low at first glance, its aura makes up for it.

The *change shape* power is a particularly nice little bit of flavor that doesn't have much impact in combat but gives the monster a disturbing aspect that mirrors the mutilated form of Torog himself. Sometimes even the most experienced designers forget the impact that these sorts of powers can have at the game table. It also reinforces the idea that monsters can be more than the sum of their statistics.

Clobbermob Nilbog

By Robert P., Toms River NJ

Try saying this monster's name quickly three times! For those who don't know, the nilbog ("goblin" spelled backward) traces its origins back to the earliest days of D&D. Its original shtick was that attacks healed the nilbog while healing spells wounded it. One of my all-time favorite *Dungeon* adventures ("Pearlman's Curiosity" in issue #32) featured one of these little buggers, and I've been favorably disposed toward them ever since.

Clobbermob nilbogs resemble regular goblins save for their greasy, violet-red skin, black eyes, and backward hands and feet. They speak a hideous mishmash of Elven and Goblin, and are inclined to sing grisly choruses as they swarm victims. Also, check out their equipment—gotta love a minion that carries around three goose eggs and a roasted pixie!

I'm guessing that "AC 1" is not an error but an attempt to reflect the idea that nilbogs are "damage magnets." I think I'd change its Thievery bonus to +17 to account for training, but its other defenses and its damage are spot on.

Clobbermob Nilbog	**Level 14 Minion Brute**
Small fey humanoid	XP 250
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.	**Initiative** +14
AC 1, **Fortitude** 27, **Reflex** 26, **Will** 26	**Perception** +12
Speed 6	
Immune attack powers with the weapon keyword	

Traits

Healing Aversion
The nilbog loses its immunity and all temporary hit points if a creature adjacent to it uses a second wind or heals from a power with the healing keyword.

Tough Little Bugger
Whenever the nilbog is hit with an attack power that has the weapon keyword, it gains 5 temporary hit points. These temporary hit points are cumulative.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Knucklebone Cudgel** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +19 vs. AC
Hit: 14 damage.

Skills Thievery +12

Str 23 (+13)	**Dex** 20 (+12)	**Wis** 20 (+12)
Con 20 (+12)	**Int** 20 (+12)	**Cha** 20 (+12)

Alignment evil **Languages** Elven, Goblin
Equipment knucklebone cudgel, burlap sack (tunic), wine bladder, three goose eggs, spit-roasted pixie

Clockwork Wasp Drone

By Beren Ross S., Fort Collins CO

Beren reports that this particular minion was used during a fight where the heroes had to climb a tower with moving floors (shaped like *Tetris* pieces) while being attacked by a hive of clockwork wasps, leading to a boss battle with their queen at the top. That's one battle I would've loved to see!

Being small of brain, I like minions that are simple and straightforward. However, the best minions have a signature power or trait that embodies what the monster is all about. In this case, it's the extra damage that the drone deals when it's adjacent to allies; it makes the DM want to group these minions into tight swarms, and how appropriate is that?

As is true of many minions, the clockwork wasp drone explodes when it drops to 0 hit points. This particular critter unleashes a burst of lightning that targets enemies only, so the poor drone doesn't have to worry about killing all of its buddies like an exploding can of *Raid* insecticide.

Clockwork Wasp Drone	**Level 13 Minion Skirmisher**
Small natural animate (construct)	XP 200
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +12	
AC 27, **Fortitude** 25, **Reflex** 25, **Will** 21	**Perception** +6
Speed 6, fly 6	
Immune disease, poison	
Standard Actions	
⨾ **Stinger** (poison) ✦ **At-Will**	
Effect: The drone can shift 1 square before it attacks.	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +18 vs. AC	
Hit: 8 poison damage plus 1 extra poison damage for each ally adjacent to the drone.	
Triggered Actions	
⇜ **Clockwork Burst** (lightning) ✦ **Encounter**	
Effect: The drone drops to 0 hit points.	
Attack (No Action): Close burst 1 (enemies in the burst); +16 vs. AC	
Hit: 8 lightning damage.	
Str 11 (+6) **Dex** 18 (+10) **Wis** 11 (+6)	
Con 18 (+10) **Int** 2 (+2) **Cha** 10 (+6)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** –	

Honorable Mentions

Props also go to Rane S. of Nokesville VA for the "flying eyeball" (each minion comes with a random beholder eye ray) and Kendall B. of Toronto ON for the "troll whelp" (which a troll can spawn when it takes damage and then eat to gain temporary hit points).

Until the next encounter!

Joy and Sorrow

6/23/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Chris Youngs' tiefling character, Deimos, came close to realizing his dream of becoming a Sea King (a powerful sea merchant) when tragedy struck. He had assembled a fleet of loyal ships, and spent a staggering amount of party gold to "trick out" his flagship, the Morrow *(named after his surrogate father, Captain Denarion Morrow). However, as happens in my campaign, the winds of fate blew ill one game session and the* Morrow *was blown to smithereens. The details aren't relevant; what's important is that I could hear Deimos's dreams of world domination shatter like a dropped mirror, and Chris was not a happy camper.*

The explosion that obliterated the Morrow *also killed Deimos and all but one of the other player characters, but their deaths were but a temporary inconvenience. Once he was raised from the dead, Deimos (a.k.a. Sea King Impstinger) was far more concerned about his precious ship lying in pieces at the bottom of the Dragon Sea than all of the actual party quests combined. What followed was a largely improvised game session during which Deimos, his companions in tow, approached various NPCs in the hopes of finding some way to "undo" the ship's destruction.*

Deimos eventually corralled the other heroes into helping him obtain a time-travel talisman, but that endeavor ended badly. The details aren't relevant; suffice to say, the talisman slipped through their proverbial fingers. What's

more important is that Deimos was thwarted, desperate, and broken.

Okay, not quite broken—Chris had one card left in his hand. As one should expect from a wrathful tiefling, Deimos turned to the Nine Hells for aid. Without consulting his adventuring companions, he used a ritual to summon an aspect of Dispater and entered into a binding contract with the archdevil, whereby Dispater would help Deimos raise his ship in exchange for Deimos taking an infernal consort and protecting her with his life. Once the agreement was signed, Dispater released the soul of a long-dead tiefling archwizard of Bael Turath named Samantia Carnago, who used her formidable magic to raise the Morrow *from the depths.*

As the ship broke the water's surface, it became clear that the vessel had been transformed into an infernal aspect of its former self—iron rails lined with everburning torches, sails of black smoke, a flag of burning fire, and the stench of brimstone throughout. It became a constant reminder of the contract that Deimos had brokered. Her work done, Samantia returned to the Nine Hells, leaving the other characters to ponder what Deimos had gotten them into.

In the end, Deimos's ship was returned to him... but not in the way the players imagined. Chris changed the name of the ship from the Morrow *to the* Sorrow*, and Deimos set about hiring a new crew to replace those he'd lost. Several sessions later, having left his ship briefly to complete an important quest, Deimos returned to find a tiefling woman curled up in his iron-wrought captain's bed. She sat up, smiled, and introduced herself as Tyranny, his infernal consort. As Chris pondered this latest development, the other players squirmed in their chairs.*

The DM giveth, and the DM taketh away . . . and vice versa.

Every campaign needs moments when the heroes feel like they're on top of the world—times when things seem to be going their way. These are the moments when their carefully laid plans go off without a hitch, when the battle is made easier because *they* have the advantage. As a counterpoint, the campaign also needs those deep, dark nadirs when the players are convinced you hate them for some unspeakable reason. These are the moments when nothing seems to go right, when every step forward pulls them two steps back, and where they feel the loss of something important to them.

I like it when my players feel mighty and powerful, and I like it when they feel helpless and at their wits' end. Without these high points and low points, the campaign would lose its drama. No one wants to see a movie where the good guy always wins or always loses. We want to see our heroes win the race, but only after knocking down some hurdles—or lose the race, but only after saving that cat in the tree.

I know many DMs who are terrified to give their players ships, strongholds, and other "gifts" for fear that the campaign will run off the rails and explode like a train carrying rocket fuel. I know other DMs who give their players a veritable Death Star, only to then stand back and watch helplessly as the heroes blow their campaigns to dust. I don't have any problem giving my players really cool toys to play with, because ultimately I know that everything in my campaign can be used to tell a story, and the social contract I have with my players allows me the flexibility to do nasty things to fuel "good drama." When the *Morrow* explodes, Deimos loses more than his ship; he also loses his moral compass. He eventually wins back the ship, which is the most important thing in the world to him—but ask the other players and they'll tell you: He never found his moral compass. That realization, coupled with the presence of the infernal consort, sets the stage for even more drama in future sessions.

Ultimately, my job as the DM is to propel the story forward and make my players happy. I can be brutal and savage to the characters, as long as my players know that the winds of fate will eventually blow in their favor. It's part of the social contract that you "sign" with players at the start of your campaign, the same social contract that says everyone at the table will respect one another. If the social contract you have is anything like mine, your players will accept a certain amount of torment and abuse in exchange for the promise of happiness, however fleeting.

There's a certain amount of improvisational skill required to pull off great drama in a game session. Case in point, when the *Morrow* blew up, I had no idea that Chris Youngs would have his character make a deal with the devil. I was just as surprised as everyone else around the table. It took a fair amount of improvisational skill to devise the terms of the

contract on the spot. An expert DM embraces those wonderful moments when the actions of the player characters propel the story forward, and anytime I can introduce a new NPC for the heroes to interact with, I jump on it (even if she's an vile succubus passing herself off as a seductive tiefling).

I won't lie to you: Narrative improvisation comes with experience. However, when I'm stuck and nothing springs to mind, I turn to TV's storytelling masters and ask myself, "What would Joss Whedon do?" "What would Alan Ball do?" or "What would Ronald D. Moore do?" You'd be surprised how well that works.

Lessons Learned

Good storytellers understand what makes good drama: **joy** and **sorrow**. You can't have drama without laughter and tears, just like you can't have a great hotdog without mustard and meat. (Okay, that's a terrible analogy, but all you mustard-haters and tofu-lovers out there can keep your arguments to yourself!)

Before you blow up the heroes' stronghold and start layering on the drama, stop and consider the social contract of your campaign—the unspoken agreement you have with your players whereby you promise to be entertaining and fair, and they promise to respect your campaign and each other's right to enjoy the experience. Some players have enough drama in their normal lives; all they want is to kill monsters and take their stuff. That's okay if it's part of the agreed-upon social contract. Campaigns without social contracts are doomed, and if your game group feels dysfunctional, chances are your contract is not being respected or acknowledged by everyone around the table.

In the end, a campaign can't rise to its dramatic heights or descend to its dramatic depths without a sturdy social contract between the DM and the players. Some players (particularly those who can't recognize specific dramatic tropes) don't like it when their characters are punished for their decisions and actions. They get upset when their characters are thrown in jail for murdering innocent bystanders, and they start throwing dice around when you take away their magic items. Maybe they don't appreciate the intricately layered drama unfolding before their eyes and aren't patient enough to wait for good stuff to happen. In that case, it never hurts to tell the players that all is not lost, and assure them that their characters' actions are the rudders and sails that determine the course of the campaign. On the other hand, if your social contract permits you to drag your players through heaven and hell with impunity, go for it! Just don't leave them in either place for too long. Time for a quick gut-check:

- **Are you happy with the social contract you have with your players?**
- **When was the last time the players in your campaign felt powerless and defeated? When was the last time they felt like they were in control?**

Until the next encounter!

All Talk

6/30/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

In the previous session, the heroes fought a death knight armed with a soul-draining sword. Two of them fell prey to the weapon.

Once the death knight was destroyed, the surviving heroes sought to free their companion's souls from the hungry blade. They turned to one of their dubious NPC allies—Osterneth, a lich with connections to the god Vecna—and she assured them the souls could be freed by bathing the sword in the blood of a virtuous god. Fortunately for them, she happened to have the blood of a slain lawful good deity in her workshop.

Unfortunately, things did not go as planned: The blood completely destroyed the sword and the souls along with it. The lich apologized profusely and tried to make amends. She offered to instead implant an artificial heart in one of the fallen heroes: Nick DiPetrillo's character, the swordmage Yuriel, but the heart was designed to pump necrotic sludge through the veins of its beneficiary. Implanting it would effectively transform Yuriel into an undead creature.

The heroes considered and rejected Osterneth's offer—but they did bring the lich and their dead friends back to Yuriel's ship, the Maelstrom, and consoled Yuriel's distraught widow. They also conferred with a more trustworthy NPC ally, a dragonborn priestess, and asked her to petition Bahamut for advice on how to save the souls of their dead friends. A Commune ritual bore no fruit—the priestess concluded that their souls were well and truly lost.

Meanwhile, left to her own devices, the lich gently persuaded Yuriel's widow that "undead Yuriel" was better than no Yuriel at all; and so, the lich obtained permission to implant the necrotic heart in Yuriel's corpse. Nick returned the following week with a new version of his character built using the new vampire class from Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow as a chassis.

The heroes, not fond of the "new" Yuriel, were troubled by the audacity of the lich, Osterneth. They were also distressed to learn that Yuriel needed the "life's breath" of living creatures to "survive" in his undead state. Yuriel's widow, a genasi named Pearl, diffused a tense confrontation between the lich, Yuriel, and his former companions by offering her own life's breath to sustain her undead husband.

Then, as the Maelstrom made port on the island of Severasa, a group of dwarves in league with the Ironstar Cartel approached them for assistance. Frost giants had seized an important mine that the dwarves needed to finish building an iron ship—a prototype vessel that they hoped would earn them a lucrative shipbuilding contract with the Dragovar Empire. To save her own "skin" and redeem herself in the eyes of the heroes, Osterneth used her apparent omniscience to ascertain that a rival consortium, the Winterleaf Coster, was employing the frost giants to delay the completion of the iron ship long enough to swoop in and steal the contract from under the Ironstar Cartel's nose.

Convinced that the lich was speaking the truth, the heroes confronted the Winterleaf Coster and threatened to expose their plot if they didn't withdraw the frost giants from the mine immediately. They were very persuasive.

My Monday night group is a very different animal from my Wednesday night group. If the Wednesday players don't get to kill something every session, they think I'm punishing them. The Monday group, on the other hand, is more willing to entertain the notion of a "diceless" session. They also have more tolerance for entertaining NPCs of conspicuously evil bent.

Osterneth the lich was ripped from the pages of *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*™, although I made a few tweaks to her history to accommodate my campaign. As the thousand-year-old ex-wife of the archwizard-turned-god Vecna, Osterneth is a tremendous source of information—and the Monday night group is naturally hesitant to make an enemy of her. I'd like to say her heart's in the right place, but in truth, she's a lich with bones of bronze, and the desiccated black heart hovering inside her hollow ribcage actually belongs to her ex. Her connection to the God of Secrets gives her access to information the heroes need to complete their quests, and she's courteous enough to conceal her true form behind the illusion of a beautiful and charming Vhaltese noblewoman.

But, to the point: The events described above played out over two game sessions, during which time the players made zero attack rolls. It was a roleplayer's bonanza, and the hardest part for me was keeping all of the player characters involved. Even those who don't typically take center stage during roleplaying encounters were on the hook.

Case in point: Jeff Alvarez's character, the sword-wielding elf ranger Kithvolar, is the "silent killer" of the group. Whenever I noticed that Kithvolar had dropped out of the spotlight for too long, Osterneth would exchange playful banter with him, or a member of the *Maelstrom* crew would try to split a bottle of rum with him and offer an unsolicited opinion about recent events. When the heroes were threatening agents of the Winterleaf Coster, I tried to establish a relationship between Kithvolar and the villainous Talia Winterleaf, the elf daughter of the Coster's founder. It's fun to watch a character known for his brutal savagery confront an enemy he can't kill—at least not without foiling the party's plans and earning the enmity of a politically powerful organization.

Although everyone seemed to be having fun, I always feel like I should apologize to my players when we have a session that's "all talk." At the end of the session, I told them, "Next week you'll get to

kill something, I promise!" The players gave me dismissive gestures, and Peter Schaefer (who currently plays Metis, Osterneth's treacherous changeling manservant) exclaimed, "Are you kidding, these are my favorite sessions!"

More than once during these sessions, I was certain a fight would break out, but the players never went there. Things probably would've played out differently on Wednesday night. I guess that's why the players in the Wednesday group often joke that the Monday players "sit around the table drinking tea" while they're busy cracking skulls and fart jokes.

Lessons Learned

There's no shortage of D&D players in Renton, WA, so back when I was building my two game groups, I tried to put "birds of a feather" together. The Monday group thinks the Wednesday group is comprised of uncouth savages, while the Wednesday group thinks the Monday players get all their XP from story awards rather than combat challenges. These perceptions are mostly false—the two groups are more alike than not—but running two different groups of players has taught me that despite their subtle differences in play styles, I can get away with combat-free sessions provided all of the players are pulled into the roleplaying fray.

I also believe that the players—not the DM—get to decide when the talking stops and the fighting begins. I'm never disappointed when a player shouts, "Enough talk! Time to die!" because that invariably leads to two of the sweetest words in the D&D lexicon: *Roll initiative.*

Any DM can survive the dreaded "all talk" session, but it'll be most fun for all concerned if you hold fast to the following suggestions:

- **Pull all of the players into the roleplaying fray (kicking and screaming if necessary).**
- **Let the players decide when the talking's over.**

As a quick footnote, I would like to give props to Calvin K. of Lincoln NE for his "Magnificent Minion!" entry, which came in at the tail end of the contest: the wacky **wall of flesh**. Each wall minion comes with one random graft: an eye that projects a psychic bolt, a mouth that roars, an arm that delivers a real punch, or a tentacle that slides you around. It doesn't get much weirder than that, folks!

Next week we'll discuss the cinematic art of bringing back dead heroes and villains and the wonderful havoc that can ensue if you time it just right.

Until the next encounter!

It's About Time

7/7/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes have traveled to the Feywild in search of a knowledgeable archwizard, only to discover that a lamia has taken over the wizard's tower in his absence. Having seduced the wizard's apprentice, she's convinced him to help her locate a talisman hidden somewhere in the tower.

The heroes defeat the lamia, break her spell on the apprentice, and wait for the archwizard to return, whereupon he calls forth a Leomund's secret chest and offers them the talisman inside as their reward.

With it, he says, they can travel back in time.

This week, I'd planned to discuss the dramatic impact of bringing back long-lost characters and NPCs. However, a question posed by Khilkhameth concerning last week's article has prompted me to veer off on a tangent. The question is:

How do you keep players involved in the game once their characters are killed off?

My stock answer is, "Have them play something else—*anything* else." Have them play an NPC companion, hand them a monster stat block, or have them return as ghostly apparitions that haunt the party until Raise Dead rituals can be cast. Anything is better than having the players fall asleep at the game table. In the case of one Monday night player, I decided it was time to bring back an old character that the game group had all but forgotten.

The Monday group recently lost two characters: the genasi swordmage Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) and the eladrin warlord Andraste (played by Michele Carter). They fell prey to a death knight with a soul-eating sword. Fortunately, Nick had a backup character among the crew on the party's ship, the Maelstrom. Michele's situation was a bit more complicated. She didn't have a ready-to-play back-up character—or so she thought.

Earlier in the campaign, the heroes used the archwizard's *hourglass talisman* (a single-use wondrous item of my own invention) to travel back in time and "meet themselves" in the past. It was a great way to escape their present predicament, and afforded them the rare chance to team up with themselves and effectively play twins for a session or two. The two identical parties joined forces to face a common threat—but Andraste was the only character to survive the adventure with a living twin. Michele didn't want to play two identical characters for the rest of the campaign, so "Andraste Prime" stayed with her companions while "Andraste Past" conveniently left the group to pursue other quests and interests.

Andraste Past was absent from the campaign for over a year of game time (about ten levels of play), so even Michele was surprised when her character's temporal twin reappeared shortly after Andraste Prime's demise. The trick for me was concocting a situation that would logically reunite Andraste Past with the other heroes. To my credit, I had previously set up a major quest to rescue Andraste's father, an eladrin wizard of some repute who had been arrested for conspiracy. It made perfect sense that Andraste Past would learn of her father's incarceration, particular since the news had been delivered to her temporal twin via *sending stone*. (I decided it was possible for Andraste Past to overhear messages intended for Andraste Prime.)

You've seen this trick used many times in TV shows and movies: Having suffered a great loss or setback, the heroes are drowning their sorrows when a familiar face appears out of the blue. It might be the face of salvation or a harbinger of worse things to come. Either way, it's a tried-and-true cliché that can be surprisingly rousing, particularly if the character is beloved or reviled. (I used a similar trick once with a villain who'd cloned himself. As I recall, his sudden reappearance was greeted with gasps of "Oh, no!" followed by shaking of fists.) Remember the scene in J.J. Abrams' *Star Trek* when Spock Prime first appears in the ice cave? Yeah, you know what I'm talkin' about.

Andraste Past filled the hole left behind by poor Andraste Prime, but not perfectly. In order for Michele to effectively play Andraste Past, she needed a quick download of that character's recent accomplishments—just the highlights. This required some prep work on my part, and the information I provided gave Michele a sense of the experiences that had shaped Andraste Past once she'd left the party. Of course, she was free to swap out her old gear for

new stuff, as appropriate. For Michele, these events afforded her the opportunity to redefine Andraste's relationship with the other heroes and play a version of the character with her own agenda and aspirations.

Lessons Learned

Time travel is a great storytelling tool, but like a chainsaw it comes with a warning label. Used unwisely, it can mutilate your campaign, as it demands a great deal of forethought and caution. I once subjected the Monday night group to the effects of an arcane contraption that teleported them into the future—the specifics of which are discussed in my blog. It was shocking and fun, but it took weeks of preparation since I needed to figure out all the ways in which Future Iomandra was different from Current Iomandra. (In general, the farther into the future you travel, the more gaps need to be filled.) Also, there are many complex factors to consider, such as determining which characters are still alive in the future, and what tragic fates befell the ones that aren't.

My dalliance with time travel in the Iomandra campaign has taught me a few things:

- **If you use time travel, be ready for the unexpected.**
- **The past is easier to navigate than the future.**
- **Keep the "rules" for time travel as simple as possible.**

Don't introduce time travel if you're worried about players altering your campaign's history or acquiring items or information normally beyond their reach. Just as I view time travel as a fun way to mess with my players, they see time travel as a fun way to mess with my campaign. As for the "rules" of time travel, you need to determine how to handle temporal paradoxes and the extent to which the heroes can affect change.

When I decided to give the Monday players the *hourglass talisman*, I did so with the full understanding that the heroes could go back in time, meet themselves, and change the course of history. But imagine if a character travels back in time and kills his parents before he's born. What happens next? Does the character suddenly disappear, having effectively erased himself, or is he a separate entity from his unborn self and therefore unaffected? Probably best not to overthink it, but there needs to be an underlying logic that the players can follow; otherwise, you're playing a game without rules, and that will cause your campaign to crack and fall apart.

My own rules for time travel are simple:

- **A character traveling through time is removed from play in the present timeline.**
- **A character traveling to the past or future is not affected by the changing states of creatures around him, including older and younger versions of himself. He can be wounded and killed as normal, but nothing adverse happens to him if his younger or older self is injured or dies.**
- **Time travel effects have durations. No matter how far into the past or present a character travels, he only gets to stay there for a finite amount of time before the time travel effect ends and he returns to the time and place whence he came. In this way, time travel is like an elastic band; eventually, the time traveler gets pulled back to the exact time and place he left, minus any gear he left behind or resources he expended. This is true even if the character dies in the past or present.**
- **If a character acquires an item in the past or future, he still has the item when he returns to his normal time. So, if the character travels to the future, kills an evil wizard and takes the wizard's staff back to the present, the character now has the staff and the wizard (who is technically still alive) does not.**

These rules don't address every corner case that comes up during play, and thoughtful players might discover (and exploit) a few loopholes. If they do, you'll have to improvise. If improvisation isn't one of your strengths, it's probably best to forego time travel for the time being rather than let it disrupt or destroy your otherwise spectacular campaign.

Until the next encounter!

What's in a Name?

7/14/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The heroes have embarked on a quest to retrieve Fathomreaver, a cutlass with the power to unite the Sea Kings of Iomandra under one banner. However, time is of the essence, for the cutlass is also hunted by their arch-nemesis—a merciless, one-eyed dragonborn warlord named Vantajar.

This mythic weapon was last seen in the hands of Sea King Draeken Malios, whose ship was lost in the Battle of the Roiling Cauldron nearly a century ago. Somehow the cutlass found its way into the Elemental Chaos. In last week's game, the heroes set sail for the Demonmaw Sargasso and were drawn down into a deadly vortex. They survived the descent, and their ship came to rest on an ocean of jagged ice in the Elemental Chaos near several other vessels trapped in the frigid wasteland, including a ship made of black glass and another made of stone.

Not long after their arrival, the heroes came face-to-face with the captains of these stranded vessels: a fire-haired azer named Captain Zarance; a stormsoul genasi named Captain Ferrik Spark; a stone-skinned half-giant named Shrador; a water archon called Worlus; and a frost-bearded dwarf named Parcilla Shatterbone.

"Oh, frabjous day!" my players cried. "Five new NPCs to add to the ever-growing cast of thousands!"

One of my frequent readers, Matthias Schäfer, sent an email to dndinsider@wizards.com asking why I give my NPCs weird names like "Draeken Malios" and "Vantajar" instead of more pronounceable ones taken from English, such as "Hammersmith" and "Clearwater." He's also curious how I make my players remember such odd names so that they don't end up calling them "the dead Sea King" or "that dragonborn dude."

First, you all need to know that I have a problem: I like concocting weird names. It's a favorite exercise of mine, and one that drives me to create entire lists of names that I keep in binders for handy reference, so that if I ever need a name on the spot, I have scores of them to choose from. (And once I choose a name from the list, I strike it off so that I don't end up reapplying it to another NPC down the road.) It's one of the best DM tricks in the world, because it gives my players the impression that I've named every NPC in the campaign (which, I suppose, I have).

No John Smiths

There's a reason why you'll never encounter an NPC named "John Smith" in my campaign. I find that common English names rip players out of their fantasy world. Even "Jonah Hammersmith" treads a little too close to reality for my tastes. However, I have no problem with "Jaxar Hammersmith" as a dwarf name. In fact, I think I'll add that one to my ever-growing list.

When I set out to build the cultures of my campaign world, I decided to apply certain naming conventions to each race. The tieflings in my campaign are refugees from a fallen empire, so I decided to derive their names from Roman and Greek cultures (e.g., Decimeth, Hacari, Prismeus, Syken). They also have names more akin to those presented in the *Player's Handbook* tiefling race entry (e.g., Suffer, Sunshine, Thorn, Tyranny), although these names are usually self-chosen monikers.

Dragonborn names tend to come from Egyptian and Middle Eastern cultures (e.g., Araj, Fayal, Kaphira, Nazir) or sound like names one might ascribe to dragons (e.g., Drax, Nagarax, Rhesk).

I tend to give elves and eladrin lyrical, multisyllabic names, which is fairly stereotypical (e.g., Ariandar, Lorifir, Talonien).

Dwarves tend to have simple first names with hard or earthy consonants (e.g., Glint, Halzar, Korlag) or names culled from Polish and Hungarian name generators (e.g., Gyuri, Ferko, Szilard), and they usually have compound last names comprised of two common yet emblematic words smashed together (e.g., Ambershard, Ironvein, Stonecairn).

Halfling names are simple and playful (e.g., Corby, Happy, Rabbit, Ziza), and their last names tend to

include some thematic tie to nature or water (e.g., Blackwater, Skiprock, Yellowcrane).

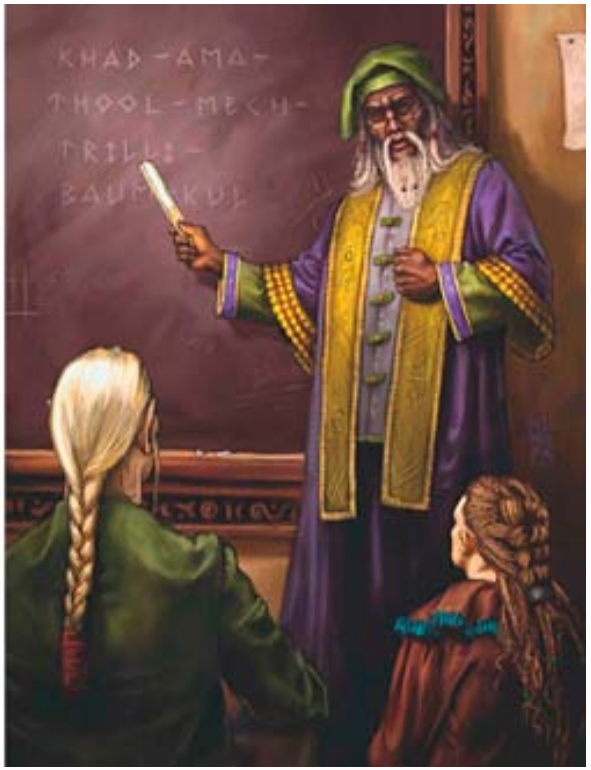
The gnomes in my campaign, though few in number, have cornered the market on silly first names or names tied thematically to magic (e.g., Donkeywheel, Dweomer, Smidgeon, Sparkle).

My human names are all over the map. I tend to go for names that sound like seldom used real-world names (e.g., Arando, Caven, Fenton, Mirabel, Remora) and last names with roots in western European cultures (e.g., Caskajaro, Moonridge, Ratley, Van Hyden), or names built around nautical terms (e.g., Coldshore, Keel, Sandershoal). The trick is coming up with names that sound human but seem grounded in a world of fantasy, not reality.

In my campaign, a name is used to evoke a certain mood or fortify the image I have in mind when I envision the NPC. It's trite, but evil NPCs tend to have evil-sounding names unless I'm deliberately playing against type or trying to mislead the players. "Lhorzo Zalagmar" and "Azrol Tharn" are two dwarf villains in my campaign. The combination of certain letters and sounds (in these specific examples, the letter "z" coupled with the "ar" sound) gives these names an indescribable harshness or sleaziness. "Talia Winterleaf," "Alathar Balefrost," and "Arromar Sunshadow" are elf villains; here I use specific words such as "winter," "balefrost," and "shadow" to help reinforce their sinister role in the campaign. Sometimes it's a combination of words that really sells the name: Case in point, the Wednesday night group recently ran afoul of a warforged villain named "Ironsmile." And on occasion, I'll surprise my players with a lighter name and apply it to a villainous character, as happened with a minor gnome villain and bard named "Clef Wimbly."

Remembering Names

I don't go out of my way to burn the names of NPCs into the minds of my players. They will remember the ones that are memorable, and they'll forget the ones that are forgettable. If the NPC appears frequently or has a decidedly memorable quirk or manner of speaking, my players have a much easier time remembering the name. However, I don't sweat it. My campaign includes thousands of NPCs. There's no way my players can remember them all. If "Azrol Tharn" is remembered as "the dwarf vampire who turns into a puddle of oil," I'm cool with that. If all else fails, the players can usually count on Curt Gould (the group's record-keeper) to surf his campaign notes and remind them if and when it becomes important.



I try not to shove names down my players' throats, because it usually comes across as forced and too often leads to mockery. For example, I would never have my villain announce, "Kneel before me, for I am the pirate warlord Vantajar, scourge of the Dragon Sea!" That's a little too much camp for my tastes. Better to have an NPC's name remain a mystery until the players express an interest in learning it, for they'll be more inclined to remember it afterward. (Would "Voldemort" have been half as memorable, unless it should not be said?)

I must admit, my players have created a private game around trying to guess how I spell the names of my NPCs. The first time a name is mentioned, they take cracks at trying to spell it, anticipating the presence of a silent "h" or the use of "zh" instead of a "j". How many different ways do my players spell and pronounce the names "Zaibon Krinvazh" or "Zaidi Arychosa"? More than one, let me tell you, and that's okay. As far as I'm concerned, such names add realism to the world by virtue of the fact that they are strangely built and difficult to pronounce. I know plenty of real-world people whose names are equally challenging (try pronouncing "Jon Schindehette" or "Bill Slavicsek" correctly, I dare you). Fortunately, my players have the benefit of hearing me say the names, so they're not just reading letters off a page.

Lessons Learned

The first several pages of my campaign binder contain lists of random names, organized by race. Down the right-hand side of the page are blank spaces where I can either add new names or record notes concerning the names I've used. For example:

Human First Names	Human Last Names
Anlow	Arkalis
~~Arando~~	Bilger
Azura (f)	~~Blackstrand~~
Bram	Carnavon
~~Cale~~	~~Corynnar~~
etc.	etc.

Arando Corynnar – Knight of Ardyn
Cale Blackstrand – Warden Drax's spy

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Where do I get my names, you ask? I've trained my wee brain to devise new names on a whim, but when I'm stuck or looking to flesh out my list, I turn to several readily available sources.

- **The Internet. Need some good names to populate the inhabitants of your dwarf stronghold? Try doing a Google search on "Hungarian names." Need names for that rampaging clan of goliaths lairing in the mountains? Try searching for "Hawaiian names" or "Native American names." The Internet is full of baby name lists, pet name lists, and other lists. If you can't find the perfect name on such a list, take two names and smash them together to create something new.**
- **Movies. Every movie in the past 20 years has a scrolling list of end credits filled with great names. Plop yourself down in front of your laptop or bigscreen TV with a notebook, skip to the credits at the end of your DVD copy of *Hellboy* or *The Return of the King*, and make note of some of the cool fantasy-sounding names that appear. You'll be surprised how many good ones you'll find, particularly if the movie was filmed on different continents.**
- **RPG supplements. Campaign-focused books such as the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide* and the *Eberron Campaign Guide* are strewn with names that can be repurposed for home campaigns. I can flip to any page in either of these two books and find an invented word that would make a great NPC name.**
- **Real names. Take a real name and tweak a few letters to create something new. "Chris Perkins" becomes "Carysto Perek." "John Smith" becomes "Joran Snythe." You get the idea.**

Until the next encounter!

Voice Talent

7/21/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are sailing aboard their elemental ship, the Maelstrom, when suddenly Captain Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) receives a sending stone message from his mentor and benefactor, Sea King Valkroi. Word has come down that Sea King Senestrago, Valkroi's hated rival and sometime campaign villain, has been killed off-camera in a naval battle.

To deliver this great news, I conjure up the very best Jamaican accent I can muster. Suddenly, Nick gives me a quizzical look and says, "Doesn't Valkroi have an Australian accent?"

Crikey!

Nick's right—I've gotten my accents and NPCs mixed up! It doesn't happen often, but when it does, I'm horribly dismayed. I use a Jamaican accent for exactly one character in my campaign—a drow crime lord named Maliq du Mavian. You'd think I would remember that! (And for those who read last week's article about names, this one's pronounced "mah-LEEK du mah-vee-AHN.") Truth be told, even good DMs have their bad moments, and when it comes to voice acting, I'm at best an amateur.

Before I dive headlong into this short discussion about using voices to bring NPCs to life, let me tell you about my recent encounter with a god among voice talent artists.

Last month, to cap off a very pleasurable experience at Comicpalooza in Houston, I shared a limo ride to the airport with voice actor and professional announcer Tom Kane. We joked about flying cars and why humans should never be allowed to have them. (I'm sure it sounded grand back in the 1950s when futurists first postulated the notion, but imagine someone's half-eaten Big Mac, leaky antifreeze, or rusted-out muffler dropping on your head from a height of 100 feet. That's not progress, people.)

As we talked and joked, Tom let a bit of Admiral Yularin (from *The Clone Wars* animated series) slip into the discussion. I was also treated to a wee bit of Yoda and a few other characters in Tom's vast repertoire. The voices came out offhandedly and effortlessly, and at that point I realized we had more in common than successful careers in the fringes of entertainment. Tom was doing something I like to do in my D&D sessions and in real life—change voices in conversation, usually for comic effect—only he was doing it really well. He is, after all, the professional, and I'm just an amateur.

I'm not selling myself short here. After all, being an amateur isn't the same thing as being a novice, as evidenced by the fact that I have more than 20 years of experience making up voices in my D&D campaigns. The fact that I don't get paid for my voice "talent" is why I'm not a professional, and frankly I'm not sure I have the chops for that line of work. Voice acting requires serious training. However, I am Canadian, which means I can do a passable Canadian accent on command. I can also riff on 2d6 + 7 other real world accents because I watch lots of TV and movies. The key word here is "riff," because I'm not sure I can do any accent justice. My German accent makes it seem like I'm mocking Germans—*you know vhat I mean, ya?* Ditto with French, Spanish, Cajun, Russian, Scottish, Jamaican, Australian, Bostonian, Minnesotan, Texan, and so on.

Anyone who's seen all four *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and all eight *Harry Potter* films should be able to conjure up one or more fake British accents (unless of course the person is genuinely British, in which case one would assume it comes naturally). If you can't, it's probably because your lips were sewn on upside-down. However, unless you're a gifted mimic with a trained ear, the voice you hear when you speak is not the same voice everyone else hears around you. I've done a lot of podcasts, and every time I listen to myself, I feel like I'm hearing a stranger talk. My recorded voice does not sound like the voice echoing in my head when I speak aloud.

Consequently, when I do an impression of a famous person like Jack Nicholson, or a famous character like Foghorn Leghorn, the voice that I ultimately create isn't exactly one or the other. It sounds similar but not exactly the same. It is, for all intents and purposes, derivative—and that's perfect. I don't want Jack Nicholson playing a part in my campaign, but I want a character inspired by him. I don't want Foghorn Leghorn, either; I want a ruthless sea captain with a lot of southern bluster or a talking stone face carved into a wall that thinks it knows everything.

Let the Mutilation Begin!

It's perfectly fine to mutilate real-world accents. So what if your Maine accent doesn't sound like a real Maine accent. It's not like your campaign in set in Maine, after all; the players won't hate you because your rendition failed to conjure memories of summers spent in Bangor. In my campaign, I have no qualms about "looting" regionally distinctive dialects, inflections, and idioms. So what if my tiefling henchman sounds like a caricature of a Boston thug? My players remember him. He's the *hahd-ass* with the big fat mouth (no offense to Bostonians). Rad Longhammer, the new intern of Acquisitions Incorporated, sounds like a Californian surfer dude—or at least my imitation of one—and he earned more than his fair share of laughs at PAX last year.

In my Monday night campaign, I have a recurring NPC named Rhutha. She's a fat dragonborn military general who really knows how to throw her weight around. When I speak in her voice, I automatically stick out my pouty lower lip, talk as deeply as I can, and enunciate every syllable slowly as though she was the long-lost dragonborn sister of Alfred Hitchcock. Then. I. Make. Each. Word. Its. Own. Sentence.

Not surprisingly, General Rhutha is one of the most memorable villains in the Iomandra campaign. It's also easy for me to remember what her voice sounds like because my entire posture changes whenever I get into character. I slouch in my chair and talk down my nose, imbuing her with a certain air of contempt. (Did I mention that DMing is one part acting, one part directing, and two parts improvisation?)

I have another dragonborn NPC who bears the scar of having had his throat cut, and he speaks with a harsh whisper—simple yet effective.

I typically reserve "new voices" (as opposed to higher-pitched, lower-pitched, faster-paced, and slower-paced versions of my natural voice) for important characters. My campaign has thousands of NPCs, and it would be physically exhausting and mentally taxing to give each one a distinctive voice. My players can usually guess the relative importance of an NPC by the extents to which I describe the character and tinker with the voice. If my description of the NPC is threadbare and the character speaks in my own voice (more or less), the players know they're probably dealing with a "one-off" NPC of little consequence. If the NPC instead sounds like Rosa Klebb in *From Russia With Love* or "Buffalo Bill" from *The Silence of the Lambs*, their expectations are immediately inflated.

I rarely forget which voice to use, but it happens—as evidenced by my recent misstep with Sea King Valkroi. To my credit, Sea King Valkroi was envisioned as a particularly important NPC in the Monday night campaign, but because of the direction the campaign went, he's been more of a background figure who pops up infrequently. I still feel like a balloonhead, however.

Lessons Learned

One of the most effective ways to make an NPC memorable (after giving him or her a distinctive physical trait, quirk, or habit) is to give him or her a voice inspired by a real-world or fictional character. Any person or character with a cool voice or trademark affectation is fair game: Antonio Banderas. Anthony Hopkins. Katherine Hepburn (*"Norrrrrman! The looooons!"*). Alan Rickman. James Cagney. Anne "*Throw Momma from the Train*" Ramsey. Peter Lorre. Vincent Price. Christopher Walken. Cheech Marin. Zsa Zsa Gabor. Arnold Schwarzenegger. If you're looking for something more exaggerated, try riffing on a character like Zapp Brannigan, Yosimite Sam, Jessica Rabbit, Gaston (from *Beauty and the Beast*), Ren (*"Steeempy, you Eeeediot!"*), or Vezzini and Fezzik (played by Wallace Shawn and André the Giant) from *The Princess Bride*.

I occasionally come up with voices "in the moment" (particularly when I'm forced to breathe life into an NPC on the fly), although I admit those aren't always the most successful. Sometimes the accent is too difficult or too hard to sustain; I once tried to make a villain sound like Dr. Claw from the *Inspector Gadget* cartoons, but my throat simply wasn't up to it. Sometimes the voice just sounds horrid, and so I end up jettisoning it or "wearing down the edges" so that it becomes a bit more palatable.

I like to rehearse voices ahead of time. My three-legged dog, Reggie, tolerates it during long walks through the back woods, where no one else can hear me. A typical rehearsal is basically 5 minutes of me trying to imitate some TV or movie villain, such as Ralph Fiennes' Voldemort or Bill Nighy's Davey Jones, and maybe twisting it in some way (to make it sound female, for example).

Here are some things worth remembering as you fearlessly experiment with voices of your own:

- **Think of an actor whose voice you like. Try to imitate it, and no matter what the quality, you will end up creating a new character voice that's all your own.**
- **Often a bad accent is better than no accent at all, and it doesn't need to be "over the top" to be memorable.**
- **Change the shape of your mouth. Try speaking with your teeth bared, your lips puckered, or your tongue firmly pressed against your lower gums. It sounds stupid, but it works.**

There are scores of other tips and tricks—had my limo ride to the airport been a few minutes longer, I would've pestered Mr. Kane for some voice acting advice to step up my game. If you have some tricks of your own, I'd love to hear about them.

Until the next encounter!

Intervention

7/28/2011

FRIDAY NIGHT.

San Diego Comic Con. I'm standing behind a podium, hosting a seminar panel on "The Art of the Dungeon Master" and sharing nuggets of wisdom with a packed house of 350+ people, most of them dedicated Dungeon Masters actively running campaigns. The presentation concludes with three tips that have served me well in my regular Monday and Wednesday night games: (1) show no fear, (2) don't get bored with your own campaign, and (3) under-prepare, but be ready to improvise.

As my presentation gives way to an open Q&A session, it's hard to miss the enormous white elephant lurking in the back corner. Every DM in the room is aware of it. It's called the difficult player, and it tramples and destroys more D&D campaigns each year than we dare admit.

This is a very real problem and a difficult topic to broach with players. It's also a topic that you and I, as dedicated Dungeon Masters, take very seriously.

During the Q&A part of the panel, one struggling DM bravely stepped forward and announced that his players made a frequent habit of laying waste to his carefully laid plans, transforming what should've been an epic campaign into a mindless slaughterfest. Not all DMs have the luxury of choosing their players. Options are limited, and sometimes jettisoning even one player can cause the entire group to crumble.

That leaves two courses of action: restructure the campaign to give the players more of what they want (and less of what you want), or force them to adhere to certain codes of conduct on threat of ending the game.

Fact: People play D&D for different reasons, and players come to the game table with different attitudes, expectations, and play styles. As DMs, we need to accept this fact, account for it in our adventures, and move on. However, every successful campaign I've ever run was built on the foundation of a social contract (usually unspoken) that specifies what is acceptable behavior versus unacceptable behavior. Ideally, the DM agrees to adhere to certain rules and to entertain the players while showing favoritism toward none. The players agree to respect each other's play styles, respect the campaign, and refrain from cheating. That's how great campaigns and lifelong friendships come to pass.

Depending on your circle of gaming friends, you might encounter one or more players who refuse to be bound by any form of social contract. They willfully or subconsciously set out to undermine your authority, the campaign, the other player's enjoyment of the tabletop gaming ritual, or potentially all of the above. Maybe they like to challenge your rulings, maybe they like to murder all of your questgivers, or maybe they keep hogging the limelight and depriving the other players of opportunities to roleplay.

Here's what I suggest you do when confronted with one or more such players: **ask them to read the following letter, or read it to them**. Before sharing it, decide whether to remove the phrase "because of you" in the first paragraph; reserve it for players who aren't likely to fly off the handle when confronted with the truth. If you think the intervention can do without it, cut it.

DEAR PLAYER(S) . . .

D&D is a game about heroes working as a team to complete quests, defeat villains and monsters, and interact with the campaign that I've created. Right now, **because of you**, our D&D game isn't working, and I need your help to fix it.

It's my job as the Dungeon Master to present a world for your character to explore and fun challenges to overcome. It's also my job to set the rules of the game, be fair to all players, and keep things exciting. I'm hoping the campaign can last a while, and that your characters have a chance to become more powerful and face new threats at higher level. It's a lot of work—and frankly, you're not making it easy on me.

It's your role as a player to have a good time, but not at the expense of me, the campaign, or the other players. When we sit down to play, there's an unspoken agreement that must be respected so that everyone has a good time. You can't have a rock band if one player refuses to take it seriously or doesn't allow everyone else to enjoy the experience. The same holds true for D&D games. That's not to say you can't have fun, but we need to agree on what's fun for everyone.

Here's what I'd like to do: I want to create the best, most fun campaign—not just for me, and not just for you, but for all of us. In return, I want to hear about the things you like and don't like about the campaign, as well as ways I can make it more suitable for your style of play so that you're having fun. I also want you to think about what makes the game fun for me and everyone else. Ultimately, we all want to have a good time, but right now that's not happening.

Lessons Learned

I have a degree in rhetoric, so I know a little something about writing persuasively. Whatever you do, keep things short and honest and private. One caveat: For spouses and siblings, do not hand them a letter! Better to memorize as much of the general content as possible, and then deliver it in a back-and-forth conversation. No point turning a dysfunctional game into a family feud!

Your goals should be to call attention to the problem without dwelling on it, and to focus on more desirable behavior, which is working together to find a solution the serves everyone's best interests. Inviting the player to be part of the solution is key; whether they agree to join your quest to save the campaign depends on how much they really want to be part of the game. Immature or disenfranchised players might refuse your "gracious" invitation; not every intervention works, and sometimes the best (albeit painful) cure for an ailing campaign is to cut loose the disruptive player. It's not ideal but sometimes necessary.

The intervention is best used as a last recourse when more disarming methods fail. In my Monday and Wednesday night games, I allow a certain amount of rowdiness and give the players license to have bad nights and silly moments. When I perceive that things are getting out of hand, I have no qualms about steering the game back on track through sheer force of will and the occasional "Okay guys, let's play this game right" remark. I also let the players police each other; more often than not, they're the ones making sure that their "inner jerks" don't screw things up and reduce the campaign to rubble.

That said, I met at least one DM at San Diego Comic Con whose players are 100% united in their quest to thoroughly trash his campaign. If that were my gaming group, I'd pack up my books and save my campaign for a worthier band of adventurers.

I might also drop by my local gaming store on a Wednesday night, unfold my DM screen, and run a D&D Encounters session. Who knows? I might meet some players who actually respect all that the game has to offer.

Until the next encounter!

Maptism

8/4/2011

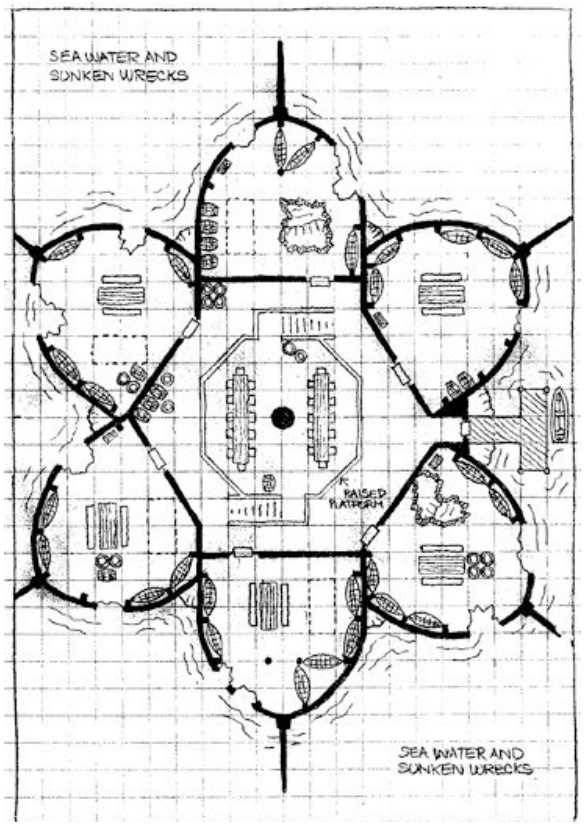
WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

The adventurers are plying the Elemental Chaos when they happen upon a pirate base made from the hulls of six wrecked ships. The map for this location is something I'd created for another purpose—an upcoming Organized Play event called D&D Lair Assault: Talon of Umberlee—*but I loved the way it turned out and decided to plunder it for my home campaign. A DM's gotta do what a DM's gotta do, and there ain't nothin' wrong with that.*

If I could get a paying job as a "D&D mapmaker," I would take that job in a heartbeat—even if the pay sucked. Don't get me wrong—I'm perfectly happy with my current line of work—but creating maps has always been a true passion of mine. Many hours have I spent drawing halls and statues and spiral staircases on graph paper over the years! These days, my schedule rarely permits me to indulge this artistic passion. Often I'm forced out of necessity to repurpose maps created for other uses—either maps I've created myself or maps created by others.

At right is the version of the map I created for *Talon of Umberlee* and plundered for my Wednesday night game, juxtaposed with a more professional rendering of the same map by freelance cartographer Mike Schley.

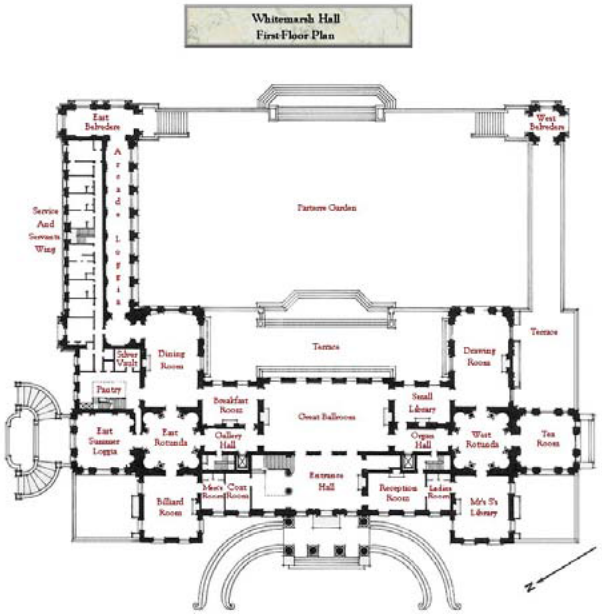
Damn, that's a cool map, if I do say so myself! Mike's version is lovely, but the location itself has a certain novelty. I spent a long time getting the shape of the hulls just right. It's always risky to go "off the grid," and I struggle a bit with curved walls. (With this map, I cheated: I drew a ship's bow on a separate piece of graph paper and then traced it over and over to create the versions that appear in my sketch version of the final map.)



Those of you who choose to participate in the D&D Lair Assault program (premiering in September and running concurrently with the in-store D&D Encounters program) might actually get to play the encounter for which this map was truly designed. If not, feel free to loot the map for your home campaign. That's what I do—and what every good Dungeon Master does.

When I was a kid, I spent a large chunk of my allowance on D&D and AD&D adventure modules, knowing full well I'd never find time to run all of them. The adventure maps were usually printed on the inside covers, and they were so incredibly evocative and immersive that I would often decide whether an adventure was worth running based solely on the maps. Would Count Strahd von Zarovich be half the vampire he is today if not for Castle Ravenloft?

I think it's hard to be a Dungeon Master and not be inspired by good maps. World maps, dungeon maps, castle maps—they define the world as much as any character, NPC, or plot. I don't think a love of maps is required to be a great DM, but it certainly hasn't hurt or hindered me. In fact, whenever I try to conjure up a new adventure, one of the first things I



think about is the key adventure location and what the map might look like. In your campaign, it might be a haunted castle, a temple built by a pharaoh's monstrous thralls, or the killer dungeon of a mad archwizard. In my campaign, it might be the winter palace of the Dragovar emperor, a star pact warlock's celestial observatory, or an elemental warship.

Recently I had an opportunity to catch up with Monte Cook, who I don't see often enough these days, much to my chagrin. Monte is a brilliant DM who creates stories of remarkable depth and worlds of such intricacy that they feel absolutely real (although what actually makes him brilliant is his willingness to let the players decide where to take the campaign and roll with it, which, incidentally, is the topic of next week's column—but I digress). Years ago, I was a regular player in Monte's famous Ptolus campaign which, like my current campaign, was run with two different groups on Monday and Wednesday evenings. I was in both groups, which allowed me to observe how Monte managed to create intersecting stories and opportunities for one group's antics to influence the other.

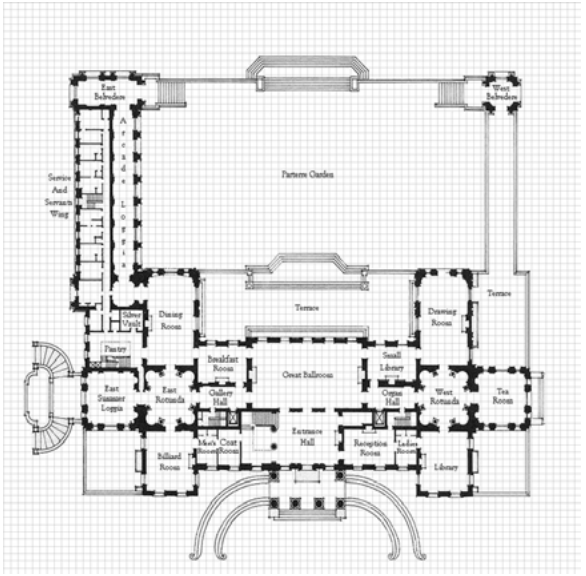
One thing that Monte and I have in common beyond our passion and predilection for DMing is a love of maps. He, like me, is a diehard map aficionado. One need only flip through the 672-page *Ptolus: City by the Spire* tome to see his passion for maps brought to vivid life. (The book's cartography won an ENnie Award in 2007.)

When Monte worked at Wizards of the Coast, he used to bring graph paper to meetings and draw gloriously Gygaxian dungeon maps. I wonder how many of those offhand designs ended up in print? I did the same thing in high school English class—my only regret was that I didn't save any of those old maps, crappy as they doubtless were. My early designs were often nonsensical, and over the years I've learned that even dungeons need some internal logic in their design—that even the craziest archwizard or pharaoh builds toward a purpose, and every castle regardless of size needs at least one lavatory or privy.

I don't have as much time to draw maps as I used to, so whenever I attend a gaming convention and have a few hours to kill, I glide through the exhibit hall and peruse RPG books for interesting maps. If I see something I like, I'll buy it in the hopes of plundering it for my home campaign. Masterwork Maps products are notorious for catching my eye; they produce great stuff, and their castle maps are particularly awesome.

When I'm feeling lazy or pressed for time, I forgo the graph paper and instead turn to the Internet for inspiration. For an upcoming adventure, I needed to create a map of a mansion, so I typed "mansion blueprints" into the Google search engine and discovered among the myriad images the following low-res image of a real-world residence called Whitemarsh Hall:

Realizing that I was missing the upstairs blueprint, I did a Google search on Whitemarsh Hall and discovered an excellent website chronicling the history



of the mansion, with maps of the upstairs and downstairs levels as well as exterior and interior images that could easily serve as player handouts. Marveling at my good fortune, I copied the mansion blueprints (GIFs) to my desktop.

Since these maps don't have a grid, I decided to add one. (The grid makes it easier for me to replicate sections of the map on a wet-erase battle map during the game.) I downloaded some free digital graph paper, which is a wonderful DM resource, and even specified how big I wanted the grid and the paper size to be. After converting the graph paper PDF into a JPG, I superimposed the maps of the mansion onto the grid. I copy-and-pasted them onto the graph paper as separate layers and resized them using the Edit > Transform function of Adobe Photoshop so that the walls and grid aligned more closely. Here, then, is what the mansion's ground floor looks like on digital graph paper:

In Photoshop, I can erase the tags I don't want and add whatever other embellishments I like. However,

in this case, the maps don't require much manipulation. I'm pretty happy with them as they are.

Lessons Learned

I've often joked that maps are D&D porn for Dungeon Masters. Forgive the weird analogy, but opening up the gatefold covers of old AD&D adventures is like opening a *Playboy* or *Playgirl* centerfold, inviting drooling DMs to take their players into the poisonous dungeon beneath the Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan or the haunted house on the cliff in *The Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh*. Past issues of *Dungeon* are another great source of maps; the magazine has been around in one form or another since 1986, and those of you who have access to back issues are sitting on a veritable goldmine.

We're even learning the lesson here at Wizards and trying our best to get new maps into DM's hands, by every practical means, because we know DMs don't have the time or ability to create their own. Alas, too many modern adventure modules don't pay enough mind to creative map design, and consequently they offer precious little plunder for DMs who need good maps to fuel their campaigns. (There are many notable exceptions.) If you can't steal a map from *Dungeon* magazine or some other source, you can always turn to the Internet and use its power for good.

Do a Google search on "castle maps" and see what you get. Now try "dungeon maps." Next, "wilderness maps." Finally, try searching for "medieval city maps." (editor's note: Don't pass up a chance to visit the Cartographer's Guild.) I think you'll be awakened to new adventure possibilities. Truth be told, you might never need to draw another map again—although I hope that's untrue, since it's incumbent upon all DMs to put pencil to graph paper and create new dungeons that might one day get published for the rest of us to steal at our leisure.

Until the next encounter!

DM's Lib

8/11/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are assaulting the Black Candle, a secret stronghold of Vecna-worshiping wizards. Upon reaching the inner sanctum, they discover that their adversaries have summoned an aspect of Vecna mounted on a dracolich. As the aspect turns to destroy them, the beleaguered, resource-drained heroes lower their weapons and beg for a truce, remembering that they and the Maimed Lord share a common foe—a growing threat from the Far Realm.

I ask the players to make group Diplomacy checks as the aspect of Vecna considers their characters' words. The dice results are in the party's favor, and so the undead lord decides to heed the wisdom of their counsel and forge a temporary alliance. The aspect allows the heroes to destroy those they came to destroy and promises to send a more worthy vassal to them at a later time, as part of a pledge to aid them in their efforts to destroy the Far Realm threat.

End of session.

This is not how I expected the game session to end. I expected what most DMs expect: a few minced words followed by a lot of blood and shattered bones. But then, I sometimes forget that a good DM provides the compass but lets the players choose the direction.

I've often said that improvisation is the best tool in any Dungeon Master's toolbox. Actually, it's more of a skill than a tool, and I primarily rely on improvisation to curtail on preparation time and to keep my game from stalling or becoming dull. And like any skill, it develops over time.

If you doubt your improvisational skills, take the following test:

The heroes have a quest to slay Snurre Ironbelly, the fire giant king. After slaughtering their way to his august presence, they decide on a whim not to kill him. Instead, they offer their services as mercenaries-for-hire, citing their success in breaching his hall as proof of their competence. Maybe the offer is genuine, maybe it's a ruse. Regardless, does Snurre attack the heroes?

Some DMs prefer to run published adventures because the story is heavily scripted, and the likelihood that the DM will be called upon to improvise is greatly reduced. But even published adventures cannot account for every action the player characters might take.

In *Hall of the Fire Giant King*, the classic AD&D module, the heroes are expected to kill Snurre. At least, that's what Gary Gygax surely intended when TSR published the original adventure back in 1978. However, no published adventure can account for every possible player choice, and a good DM, like any good storyteller, knows an opportunity when he or she sees it. Snurre's death might be a foregone conclusion, but situations that naturally arise to forestall the inevitable are always worth exploring, as are opportunities that allow characters to break out of the traditional "adventurer" role and spend a few sessions trying on different hats (like the mercenary hat, for example) or exploring their morality.

Were I the DM, I would let the skill check results guide my decision, but I would be strongly disposed toward taking the story in the more unexpected direction. Being a fire giant, Snurre would certainly respect shows of brute force and raw power, so of course he'd want mighty adventurers at his beck and call—who wouldn't? Having the heroes become

Snurre's henchmen, even briefly, is the stuff players will remember long after the campaign has ended.

Now try this one:

> **The heroes receive a quest to escort the Imperial heir to the capital. The foolish young heir proves to be a royal pain in the ass, and despite the heroes' efforts (or because of them), the heir dies en route. Rather than deliver his dead body, the heroes bury it and decide that one of them will use a hat of disguise to impersonate the heir and perhaps, in time, assume lordship over the kingdom. As the DM, do you allow this?**

Yes, of course you do! Maybe you never expected the campaign to bend in that direction, but it's a perfectly logical development to the story, and one that's likely to spur all kinds of wonderful roleplaying opportunities and campaign developments. Suddenly the heroes have a secret and a chance to really turn the campaign on its head. By allowing for unexpected twists and turns, you've forced yourself to improvise, and every time you do this, your improvisational skill improves and the players' expectations are blown out of the water.

In a seminar at San Diego Comic Con, I urged DMs to "under-prepare, then improvise." My campaign, like many campaigns, has needs that published adventures can't address. (It has lots of roleplaying and politics, and very few sprawling dungeons.) Consequently, I rarely use published adventures, even short ones, preferring to devise my own encounters week after week. Before each game session, I type up a one-page document that goes into my campaign binder (click here for an example). On this page is a summary of important things that need to be recapped at the start of the session, followed by a list of NPCs who will likely make an appearance, followed by short descriptions of events or encounters I expect to happen. If the adventure includes a location to explore, I include a map accompanied by swatches of descriptive text reminding me of important details. Sometimes I'll require a stat block for a unique NPC or monster, but I try to use existing stat blocks and modify them as needed (as discussed in Instant Monster).

The one-page session overview illustrates the degree to which I "under-prepare" for a game session. It provides a few guideposts, but most of the session is improvised. I find my players don't suffer for the lack of preparation on my part, as long as I prod them when the action stalls and roll with them once they've committed to a course of action.

Lessons Learned

When the players do something that threatens to take the story in an unexpected direction . . .

- **Allow it.**
- **Imagine the next logical outcome or event, and proceed from there.**

If, for some reason, you can't think of the next logical outcome or event, consider ending the session on a cliffhanger and allowing yourself time to mull over the implications. A hero wants to use a hat of disguise to impersonate the royal heir? No problem. But let's see what happens when a perceptive royal sibling succeeds at an Insight check and senses something is amiss. Maybe the threat of discovery leads the characters to kill two birds with one stone by murdering the king and framing the suspicious sibling for his death. Again, no problem! Yeah, the characters have usurped a kingdom, but all the threats to the kingdom are still there—and, ironically enough, the heroes' skills as adventurers might be the kingdom's best hope of survival. The campaign marches on, just not in the way you or your players expected.

So my Monday night group, out of dire necessity, has forged an alliance with the evil god of secrets. The players know it's a marriage of convenience not long for the world, but it raises lots of interesting questions and opens up lots of roleplaying opportunities. Can the heroes learn to work alongside Vecna's evil servants? Will certain characters' personal misgivings threaten to end the alliance? Which side will betray the other first? By their choices and actions, the players have made the campaign more interesting and complicated, and they've put my improvisational skills to the test. I shall not disappoint them!

I've learned that the secret to developing one's improvisational skills as a DM is to listen to what the players want to do, and then steer the adventure

in that direction, even if it runs counter to my own expectations. Only when my expectations are challenged can the campaign go off in surprisingly fun directions. Many campaigns die of boredom (DM boredom, player boredom, or both), but you can mitigate the threat of boredom by keeping yourself open to ideas and demonstrating to your players that you're not locked into telling one story and one story only.

Until the next encounter!

Epic Fail

8/18/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

A legendary cutlass has fallen into the hands of the dragonborn warlord Vantajar, one of the campaign's major villains. He's a level 30 solo brute with an elemental warship, a crew of epic pirates, and a half dozen storm giant mercenaries riding thundercloud chariots.

Seeking the cutlass for themselves, the adventurers board Vantajar's vessel and engage their hated foe head-on, despite the fact that they're only 24th level and are outnumbered 7 to 1. As the storm giants hurl lightning bolts at the party spellcasters, Vantajar brings his cutlass down on Kael, the party cleric, dropping him dangerously close to his negative bloodied value.

With their own ship too far away to render assistance, the heroes are in dire straits. Failure is not an option – it's inevitable.

Never underestimate the resourcefulness of good players. When things look grim, when the cold eyes of death seem fixed on their characters, they somehow find a way to turn certain defeat into victory. One of the players might figure out a way to regain a spent power or healing surge. Another might whip out that half-forgotten magic item or plot detail that can tip the scales in the party's favor. Many times have I stacked the odds against my players and watched them frantically search their character sheets and campaign notes for something—anything—to turn the tide.

And even when nothing presents itself, there's always a chance that their luck could change, that their cold dice might suddenly turn red hot. Hell, I've seen player characters call out to the gods, throwing themselves at my mercy, and on rare occasion I've allowed the gods to toss them a bone, particularly if they've earned it.

Not this time.

The Wednesday night characters have thrown caution to the wind and acted rashly, and they're doomed to break like waves upon the rocks. At least, that's what I'm expecting will happen. Even as I write this column, the battle is still playing out. However, it's safe to say that I've stacked the deck against them. How could I not? Throughout the entire campaign, Vantajar has been touted as a supreme badass, a legendary renegade who surfaces like a giant shark in the nightmares of child and Sea King alike.

What makes good drama? In a word: failure.

You can't have drama if the heroes never fail. We all know the story of the good guy who faces the bad guy before he's ready and gets his ass kicked. What usually happens next is that the good guy deals with the consequences of his failure, learns a valuable lesson, gathers his wits and self-confidence, and delivers the villain's comeuppance. The story's an oldie but a goodie.

The first article in this series (Surprise! Epic Goblins!) talked about using lower-level challenges to make player characters feel powerful. It should come as no surprise that higher-level challenges have their place in the game as well. I use them all the time, not to be cruel but to reinforce the notion that some challenges aren't balanced for the heroes' level. It forces the players to switch gears, try different tactics, and rely on more than their swords and spells. It also makes the campaign world a scary place, even to epic-level characters.

It's my job as the DM to make sure that the heroes' failure doesn't spell the end of the campaign. If the Wednesday group prevails against all odds, I'll have to work harder the next time they come face-to-face with a major campaign villain. If Vantajar defeats them, the campaign isn't over, for I've concocted a

logical reason why he'd want to keep his enemies alive.

Here's a behind-the-curtain glimpse of what I'm thinking, to give you an idea of the thought process that went into planning the likely outcome of the heroes' failure: Vantajar desires to use the legendary cutlass to unite the Sea Kings—the merchant lords of Iomandra—under his banner. Once the old feuds are cast aside, he will command a navy greater than that of the Dragovar Empire, and he plans to use it to himself become Emperor. However, he needs to present the cutlass before the Eye of the Kraken (an artifact hidden in the island fortress of Krakenholt) and be judged worthy of its power. Only then will the Sea Kings kneel before him. Chris Youngs' tiefling character, Deimos, is better known as Sea King Impstinger, and the supremely arrogant Vantajar wants to see his enemy broken and forced into servitude like all the other Sea Kings. To kill Deimos and his companions now would deny Vantajar an even greater victory, not to mention the ships under Sea King Impstinger's command.

In the event of their defeat, the characters will be knocked unconscious, deprived of their gear, and hauled to Krakenholt. En route, a generous helping of torture will deprive them of their healing surges and any ability to take short or extended rests. Without their precious magic items and their encounter and daily powers, the heroes will be hard-pressed to threaten Vantajar directly, and yet I can imagine all sorts of reversals. They might convince a disloyal crew member to return a useful magic item (such as a sending stone). Maybe they'll ride out the journey and take their revenge as Vantajar presents the cutlass to the Eye of the Kraken. If all else fails, perhaps fate will intervene on their behalf: Maybe Vantajar is attacked en route by a Sea King determined to stop his ascendency, and the resulting battle affords the heroes a chance to reclaim their gear and win their freedom, or maybe the Eye of the Kraken will judge the evil warlord to be unworthy of the cutlass, denying him his destiny. Villains become much more interesting when things don't go their way. They are, after all, dark reflections of the heroes.

Lessons Learned

Sometimes a DM has to be cruel to be kind. Sometimes, for the sake of suspense and good drama, you have to drive the heroes into the dirt so that they can pick themselves back up, sharpen their game (and their blades), and stage a storybook comeback, becoming even more powerful than when they faced defeat. Here are some helpful tips to guide you:

- **Be transparent: Give your players hints that they might be in over their heads.**
- **It's okay to set the characters up for failure. Just don't be surprised if they succeed.**
- **If you expect the characters to fail and they fail, know where to take the story from there.**

Many players don't like it when their heroes fail, die, or both—especially when it happens during an "unfair" encounter. My players understand that I'm not on a quest to annihilate their characters or make them feel like useless tools, and so should yours. In classic and modern fiction, heroes rise, fall, and rise again. The unfair encounter is something you can use occasionally (emphasis on occasionally) to rouse your players and propel your campaign in interesting new directions.

If your players are unaccustomed to being trounced and you're worried that they might turn against you, you could do worse than sow the seeds of their eventual comeback. Tell the players how much you're looking forward to seeing how they remedy their characters' latest misfortune, and plant a few hints as to how they might succeed next time. Maybe the villain's subordinates are badly treated and could

be turned against him. Maybe the heroes can discover a weakness to exploit. Maybe the villain lets down his guard or makes a classic blunder of overconfidence. But I'm getting ahead of myself!

Just as the best heroes have faults, so too do the best villains. We'll tackle this subject in next week's column, and I'll pull a few examples not only from the Iomandra campaign but also from the adventure I have in store for Acquisitions Incorporated at this year's live D&D game at PAX 2011! Stay tuned.

Until the next encounter

The Villain's Fault

8/25/2011

PAX PRIME TIME

If you are planning to attend the Live D&D Game at PAX 2011, be warned! This article contains umpteen SPOILERS. You might want to skip this section.

For those who don't know, this Saturday, in the Paramount Theater in Seattle, I'm running a live game for the gang of Acquisitions Incorporated (Mike "Gabe" Krahulik, Jerry "Tycho" Holkins, Scott "PvP" Kurtz, and Wil "Don't be a dick!" Wheaton) in front of a crowd of 2,500+ PAX attendees. I'm told there will be grand entrances, pyrotechnics, costumes, and live minstrels (as opposed to dead ones, I suppose). For the past couple of weeks, I've been neglecting my home campaign to prepare for this blessed event, but costumes and minstrels aside, the thing that excites me most about the game is the opportunity to take Acquisitions Incorporated somewhere they've never been and pit them against a worthy villain.

If you can't attend the event, be sure to watch our live streaming coverage.

When last we left Jim Darkmagic, Omin Dran, and Binwin Bronzebottom, they had just freed their not-so-dead companion Aoefel from the prison-fortress of Slaughterfast. With the gang reunited, it was decided to draw them to New Hampshire for the reading of the Last Will and Testament of James Darkmagic I . . . Jim Darkmagic's grandfather. The main villain of the adventure is Jim's cousin, Percival Darkmagic, who doesn't get the inheritance he's expecting, namely a secret chest of magical lore that the Darkmagics have kept for generations. To make him interesting, however, I needed to give him some faults.

I hit upon the notion that Percy had foolishly promised to deliver this chest of "Darkmagic magic" to the Wortstaff family, a rival clan of archwizards, and woe to him should he fail! I also gave him a more peculiar fault that could have very interesting consequences: Due to a curse placed upon him as a child, Percival is incapable of seeing or hearing creatures of fey origin. I suspect Wil (who plays the eladrin Aoefel) might have some fun with that!

To Percy's credit, he's not a buffoon. He's a very, very bad person, and his plan to seize his "rightful inheritance" is quite clever, if you ask me. (Spoiler: It has something to do with the Darkmagic mansion itself, which has some unusual magical properties.) He also has a "thing" for his sister, which makes him appropriately loathsome.

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes break into a safehouse belonging to a guild of tiefling thieves called the Horned Alliance. Their objective? To free a captured member of a rival guild.

The heroes manage to free the prisoner and make their escape, only to find themselves pinned down on a rickety balcony overlooking a city built along the edges of a sunken grotto. An evil silver dragon working with the Horned Alliance lands on the balcony and blocks their escape. As the dragon begins spewing its villainous monologue, the balcony creaks under the dragon's weight, shudders, and breaks away.

Before the dragon can spread its wings and take to the air, it crashes into the city below and disappears in a cloud of dust and debris. Suffice it to say, the players are dumbfounded and seize the chance to make good their escape.

My villains, unlike their mad creator, are imperfect. They're not omniscient. They don't know everything, and like the player characters, they arrive at erroneous conclusions based on faulty assumptions. They miscalculate. They fall down. They suffer setbacks. My villains are deeply, profoundly flawed. And that's why my players like them to a fault.

The best thing about faults is that they can be exploited. Case in point, here are three villains from my Iomandra campaign, each of whom has faults for clever players to exploit:

Prismeus: This tiefling henchman works for Zaibon Krinvazh of the Horned Alliance and has been loyal to the crime lord ever since Zaibon bailed him out of prison. While imprisoned, Prismeus was tortured by his dragonborn captors, his face scarred by acid. His ill treatment and disfigurement has made him resentful of all dragonborn, and his loyalty to Zaibon is beyond reproach. When Zaibon is killed off by the heroes, Prismeus turns the Horned Alliance against Zaibon's killers, putting the entire organization in jeopardy and leading to a standoff between him, the heroes, and the Dragovar authorities who would like nothing more than to see the Horned Alliance broken once and for all.

Cale Blackstrand: This oily cad works for the Dragovar Empire. When he's not escorting criminals to the island prison of Zardkarath, he's cutting deals and taking bribes to allow criminals to be set free. He also has a weakness for powerful women. When Andraste (Michele Carter's character) needs help freeing her aunt from prison, she reluctantly turns to Cale. Under normal circumstances, Cale would betray her in a heartbeat, taking her money and leaving Andraste's aunt to rot, but he's smitten by Andraste and, like a lovesick fool, blindly agrees to her terms. It never occurs to him that he might be the one betrayed.

Osterneth the Bronze Lich: She's the ex-wife of Vecna (from the days before he became a god) and a powerful lich who hides her true form behind the illusion of a charming noblewoman. When the heroes cut a deal with an aspect of Vecna, Osterneth is sent as the Maimed Lord's trusted representative to assist them in their endeavors. Although she provides the heroes with crucial intelligence, she's also gathering secrets for her dark master. What Osterneth fails to see is that her trusted changeling manservant, Metis, might one day betray her and divulge her secret—that she has her husband's shriveled, still-beating heart lodged inside her ribcage, and that its destruction would spell Vecna's doom.

I've played in games run by experienced DMs who portray villains as unerring, evil-minded extensions of themselves. These villains seem to know everything and always have the advantage because they've been imbued with an inexplicable omniscience. It threatens my suspension of disbelief as a player when my character confronts a villain only to learn that the DM has gifted his precious bad guy with an unbelievable amount of precognition and insight into my character's plans, intentions, and secrets. Omniscient villains are boring; I'd rather face a villain who gets my character's name wrong or flees upon taking a critical hit. Suddenly, that villain seems infinitely more real to me.

Lessons Learned

The most memorable villains in television, film, and literature have faults as big as the San Andreas. These faults not only make them seem "real" but also lead to their inevitable ruin. In the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica*, Admiral Cain (played by Michelle Forbes) can't see past her hatred of the Cylons, and that hatred destroys her. In the Bond movie *Casino Royale*, the villain Le Chiffre is undone by one too many bad gambles. Hannibal Lector's fault is his affection for Clarice Starling which, on multiple occasions, nearly costs him his freedom. Annie Wilkes' fault is her sycophantic adoration for Paul Sheldon, which blinds her to his ultimate betrayal at the end of Stephen King's *Misery*. These faults do not make these characters any less fearsome or menacing. If anything, it makes them more likeable.

So here are the key takeaways:

- **Villains aren't perfect, and like the PCs, they don't know everything and they make mistakes.**
- **Let the players see your villains' flaws so that they might exploit them.**

If you're unaccustomed to concocting flaws for your villains, consider some of the classics: **love** (the villain is infatuated with one of the characters or another

NPC), **hatred** (the villain is blinded by hate and can't think straight), **ritual** (the villain cleaves to certain predictable habits), **arrogance** (the villain doesn't kill the heroes when presented with the chance), **fear** (the villain is afraid of something), **gluttony** (the villain is never satisfied and always craves more), **deformity** (the villain suffers from a physical impediment), and **curse** (the villain is tormented by an affliction, bedevilment, or unusual malady).

Maybe your villain is blind or haunted by ghosts. Maybe your villain needs a special elixir to stay young, or maybe your villain has the world's stupidest henchmen (like "Mom" in *Futurama*). In branding your villains with flaws, you might inadvertently turn them into clowns, fools, boobs, or imbeciles. Fear not. As long as they do bad things, your players will still love to hate them.

As for Percival Darkmagic (see sidebar), it remains to be seen whether he can hold his own against the heroes of Acquisitions Incorporated. Frankly, I'm more concerned that Aoefel might go wandering around the Darkmagic mansion by himself—and we all know what happens when you split the party! In any event, if you can't attend the live game at PAX, no worries: The game will be filmed and posted so that the rest of the world can see how things went down at the Darkmagic estate.

Until the next encounter!

T'wit

9/1/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Kael, the party cleric, lies dead—killed by the evil pirate warlord Vantajar moments before the warlord himself meets his end. Before Kael's bodily remains can be salvaged, the enormous water elemental powering Vantajar's warship escapes captivity and sinks the vessel. The surviving heroes flee into an extradimensional space (they are epic level, after all) and so avoid plunging into a sea of acid in the Elemental Chaos.

Chris Champagne (Kael's player) jumps on the chance to play a new character, and I spend the rest of the session trying to facilitate this character's introduction. I'm not a fan of new characters showing up inexplicably to a chorus of voices exclaiming, "You look trustworthy!" No, I much prefer well-staged entrances. Remember Captain Jack Sparrow's entrance in Pirates of the Caribbean*? Yeah—it doesn't get better than that.*

Chris's new character is Kosh, an infernal pact warlock with the Prince of Hell epic destiny. After the surviving characters use the Plane Shift ritual to get back to their own ship, I orchestrate a roleplaying encounter in which Tyranny (the succubus concubine of the ship's captain) concocts a ritual to summon Kosh from the Nine Hells. "Tyra" (as she's known) is convinced that the party could use the extra firepower, but her ritual requires nine drops of blood from nine different mortals, and being an immortal, she has only the crewmembers aboard the heroes' ship to choose from. She must also convince the player characters that this is a good idea, and that having an epic-level Prince of Hell in the party has certain advantages. Suffice to say, it's not an easy sell.

In fact, it proves to be a very hard sell and takes more than an hour of back-and-forth roleplaying and conniving on my part to make happen. Meanwhile, Chris remains silent for most of the session, jotting down notes about his character's background as I do everything in my power to bring Kosh into play—everything except shout to the other players, "Look, guys, Chris has a new character he wants to play, so stop roleplaying already and let him play!"

I'm soooo glad I didn't have to say that.

Thanks to a rash of conventions and summer vacations, many of us at Wizards are playing catch-up around the office. The interruptions have also impacted my Monday and Wednesday night campaign and thrown me off my game, to wit: Last week was the first time in a long time that I sat down at the game table and couldn't remember where we'd left off the previous session. I had to check my notes to realize, "Oh yeah, the players are smack-dab in the middle of the biggest battle of the campaign!"

DM "spaz moments" aside, I run a very brisk game—as evidenced by watching the games I run for Acquisitions Incorporated and the writers of Robot Chicken. When I look back at my notes from the previous Wednesday night session, I see a long list of "stuff that happened" that needs to be organized and recapped for the players' (and my) benefit. It also reminds me that a DM has the power to propel the campaign forward at a staggering pace with a few simple tricks.

This installment of *The Dungeon Master Experience* discusses the ancient art of **contraction** as it pertains to D&D game sessions. My impetus for tackling this subject comes from some recent encounters with DMs at conventions. One question I get asked from time to time is, "How do you pack so much stuff into one session?" I'm guessing that many DMs have experienced occasions when the campaign loses all forward momentum and plods along at an insufferable pace, either because the players lack motivation

or because the players get distracted by too much nonsense.

In English grammar, we use contractions to neatly dispose of unnecessary letters and syllables in conversation and informal writing. "I'm" is shorter and takes microseconds less time to write and say than "I am." I contract my campaign in much the same way; on a per-example basis, it doesn't amount to much, but a minute saved here and there really starts to add up in a 4-hour game session.

Here are a few specific tactics that I use:

I cut my campaign the way a film editor cuts a movie. If I find the session is lagging, I jump ahead as far as I reasonably can without causing the narrative to become disjointed. It might be rounds, minutes, hours, days, or months, but I do my best to encapsulate the skipped time period and press on. In my Wednesday night game, the ritual that Tyranny casts to summon Kosh from the Nine Hells happens very quickly in real-time because I wanted to give Chris a chance to play. But at the same time, his entrance needs to be memorable yet appropriate, and so I go the route of a giant flaming pentagram. To take a more common example, if the characters are spending too much time shopping for gear in town, I might say, "After a couple hours spent gearing up in town, you find everything you need and head east, following the edge of a vast, dry canyon. Six hours later, as the sun begins to set, you descend into the canyon and make camp near a fat cactus that provides ample water." With a couple sentences, I can push the story along and skip over countless wasted minutes.

Using subtlety and guile, I help players get past points of indecision. If the players are mired in indecision, I have an NPC offer them a well-reasoned opinion or bit of sound advice, or I give a player some free bit of information his or her character would logically know. I use this technique a lot as my way of telling the players, "The DM thinks you ought to do this, as opposed to that." Sometimes my players will ignore the advice, but that's more because I have, on occasion, used NPCs to deliberately feed them bad information and advice (a topic which, by the way, really deserves its own article).

I keep my descriptions spare. If the characters are hired to escort a merchant caravan from Town A to Town B and I've staged an encounter with bandits at some point in between, I take one sentence to describe the caravan and one sentence to describe the journey from Town A to the bandit encounter. Then, if I feel so inclined, I add a sentence that describes a few pertinent or offbeat "character moments" involving the PCs and/or significant NPCs. For example, "Shortly before nightfall on the first day of travel, one of the merchants uncorks a cask of dwarven whiskey and passes out flagons. Those of you who partake of the whiskey find it difficult to stay awake during your watch." These sentences might include inconsequential details to give the campaign color, but I don't dwell on stuff that isn't important. If the players want more information (such as the brand of dwarven whiskey), they'll usually ask for it.

I keep my NPC descriptions brief as well. In the Wednesday night game, the adventurers recently faced their arch-nemesis for the first time. My description of Vantajar, the dragonborn pirate warlord, was that he was 9 feet tall—unnaturally large for his species—and had a metal eyepatch bolted to his skull, a la General Chang (Christopher Plummer) in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. Everything else was left to the players' imaginations. I generally like to give an NPC one distinguishing characteristic before moving on.

I don't frontload information. I let it trickle out in dribs and drabs, and not just because I can always provide more information if the players ask for it. As the DM, I control the pace of the game, and if it takes me five painfully long minutes to describe the contents of a room, chances are good that the players will fail to pick up or remember important details that will then need to be repeated. My players don't need to know that a balcony is 20 feet high until that information becomes relevant.

I keep track of initiative on a magnetic white board. That way, the players can see when their turns are coming up and plan accordingly. Giving them visibility into the combat order reduces the number of wasted minutes during a player's turn.

I exhibit a low tolerance for player indecision in combat. Combat is supposed to be fluid and fast, and nothing causes the game to grind to a halt faster than an indecisive player who can't decide what actions his character should take on his turn. I will press the player with questions such as, "What does your character do?" If this doesn't push the player to swift action, I ask, "Would you like to delay?" (which, if answered in the affirmative, lets me skip forward until the player decides he's ready to jump back in). Other favorite sayings of mine include, "You can always use an at-will power" or "Do whatever feels right for your character." Another thing I do is have a monster or NPC verbally taunt or insult the character, which often incites the player to take immediate action against the offending enemy (and also breaks the lull with a touch of roleplaying).

I ignore a lot of conditions and ongoing damage effects. Ongoing damage and conditions such as "slowed" and "weakened" are useful in moderation, but they slow down the game. I urge novice DMs to avoid them like the plague. I would rather have a monster deal straight-up damage than apply "rider effects" that need to be tracked (unless they're part of a monster's "shtick"). Since most ongoing damage effects end after 1 round

anyway, it's faster and easier to have a monster that deals "ongoing 10 damage" simply deal 10 extra damage on the initial attack, and be done with it.

I dump irrelevant encounters. I imagine every encounter as a scene in a movie script and decide for myself whether it's worth preserving or not. Even a minor encounter should advance the campaign narrative in some way or provide interesting "character moments." At the very least, it should present a challenge unlike anything the players have faced before. If the players are suffering through their sixth "random wilderness encounter" in a row, I've done something horribly wrong.

Sometimes it hurts to cut stuff; case in point, I had to cut a bunch of planned moments from this year's live D&D game at PAX purely due to time constraints, including a cool bit where the Dark-magic mansion decides it doesn't like Binwin Bronzebottom and turns against him—a pity, but that's just the way it is.

I sometimes use average damage values. Average damage used consistently and to excess is boring and predictable—two things a DM never wants to be accused of being. Still, it's tech we've applied to minions with great success. In a given session, I roll lots of dice, and adding up numbers takes time. When running complex combat encounters, I alternate between rolling damage for monsters and taking average damage. I have a chart similar to the one below attached to my DM screen, and for the record, I treat monster "recharge" powers as encounter powers when determine average damage for them.

MONSTER LEVEL	NON-BRUTE DAMAGE (AT-WILL)	NON-BRUTE DAMAGE (ENCOUNTER)	BRUTE DAMAGE (AT-WILL)	BRUTE DAMAGE (ENCOUNTER)
1	9	13	11	16
2	10	15	12	18
3	11	16	13	20
4	12	18	15	22
5	13	19	16	24
6	14	21	17	26
7	15	22	18	28
8	16	24	20	30
9	17	25	21	31
10	18	27	22	33
11	19	28	23	35
12	20	30	25	37
13	21	31	26	39
14	22	33	27	41
15	23	34	28	43
16	24	36	30	45
17	25	37	31	46
18	26	39	32	48
19	27	40	33	50
20	28	42	35	52
21	29	43	36	54
22	30	45	37	56
23	31	46	38	58
24	32	48	40	60
25	33	49	41	61
26	34	51	42	63
27	35	52	43	65
28	36	54	45	67
29	37	55	46	69
30	38	57	47	71

Lessons Learned

One analogy I'm fond of using is that a D&D campaign is like a wagon. The players are the horses, and the DM is the driver holding the reins. As the players move forward, they take the campaign and you along with them, and you can guide them to a point, but they can be stubborn, hard to motivate, or just plain out of control. Sometimes you have to snap the reins, but if you "crack the whip" too often and keep the players running at full speed all the time, they'll get worn out, so you need to set a pace that's comfortable for them but also gets the wagon where it needs to go.

When it comes to setting a brisk pace, there are dozens of tactics I use to cram more "gaming time" into my game sessions, some of which are better witnessed than explained, but most of them boil down to being aggressive in my efforts to focus players on the important stuff and get them past distractions that might lead the campaign astray, cause the pace to slow to a crawl, or reduce the players' overall sense of fun. I'm sure you have your own "tried and true" tricks for packing more punch into your game sessions, and I'd love to hear about them.

With regard to my Wednesday night game, it takes a special kind of player to sit still for an hour while his friends decide whether or not to let him play. Had I been "on my game," I would've found a way to contract the back-and-forth debate about the merits of summoning a Prince of Hell so that Chris could put his cool new character in play. Still, I'm glad I didn't go the route of having Kosh magically appear out of nowhere and ask, "Anyone need an infernal warlock?" Talk about dumb.

P.S. Thanks to everyone who voted in last week's poll! The heroes of Acquisitions Incorporated made short work of Gygax the cat—for once it appears the butler didn't do it.

Until the next encounter!

Lies My DM Told Me

9/8/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Trouble on the high seas! Mind flayers are attacking coastal settlements and ships, and the adventurers are preparing to assault an illithid nautilus—a ship of mind flayers—to rescue the prisoners aboard. Imazhia, an NPC dragonborn priest of Bahamut who receives prophetic dreams, offers to cast a ritual on the characters to grant them resistance to psychic damage. The players readily accept the gift before teleporting aboard the nautilus, knowing they have their work cut out for them.

Aboard the enemy vessel, the heroes find themselves taking a lot more psychic damage from the mind flayers' attacks than expected. Something is clearly amiss, and it doesn't take a wizard to realize Imazhia has lied to them.

Her ritual has actually made them more vulnerable to psychic damage, not more resistant!

I lie to my players all the time. Or rather, my NPCs do.

I never lie to my players "out of game." In my role as DM, I'm always honest, lest the players walk away from the game table in frustration and never return. But "in game," I like to feed my players a tasty mix of true and false information. It adds to the campaign's realistic texture.

Imazhia, the dragonborn priest, is a special kind of villain—the one who pretends to be helpful until the evil Far Realm entities in her head set out to confound and destroy the adventurers. Early in the campaign, Imazhia died aboard an exploding ship and was raised from the dead by her fellow priests. The players saw her as a casualty of a villainous plot, unaware that the villains who sabotaged the ship were actually doing them a favor by taking Imazhia out. After returning from the dead, Imazhia became one of the heroes' most trusted advisors, using her dreams to guide their actions and steer them away from the monstrous threat posed by the mind flayers. By the time the threat became too great too ignore, the heroes trusted Imazhia more than most other NPCs in the campaign. Surely a psychic priest of Bahamut who'd died and come back from the dead would never deceive them.

In the real world, people speak untruths for many different reasons. Maybe they believe what they're saying is true. Maybe they are lying because they're in denial and can't face the truth. Maybe they're hiding the truth to protect someone (or something). Maybe they're lying out of guilt and fear of discovery. Or maybe they're lying for the cheap thrill, just to screw with you. The less-than-honest NPCs in my campaign deceive for all of these reasons, to the point where my players must constantly judge the words against what they know about the individual speaking them. It makes for some very interesting roleplaying, let me tell you!

In addition to the myriad reasons for not telling the truth, there are good liars and bad liars. My campaign has both. Imazhia is an example of a good liar, and it doesn't hurt that her words are bolstered by a priestly demeanor and the holy symbol of Bahamut hanging around her neck. I try to limit the number of really good NPC liars in my campaign to a handful, since it takes time for players to hack through the web of lies, and frankly, too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. On the other hand, my campaign has no shortage of bad liars, and in some respects they're more fun. The players don't have to work nearly as hard to cut to the truth, and a bad liar makes for great comedy.

Feeding false information to player characters is something that's been part of D&D since the early days of the game. Old adventures such as module L1 *The Secret of Bone Hill* had those marvelous "rumor tables" that encouraged you to roll dice to determine which rumors the characters knew. Some of the rumors were true, some false. I once ran module L1 for some middle school friends who learned, via the rumor table, that the Baron of Restenford was chaotic evil, and so they decided to attack the baron's castle. Never mind that the baron was actually chaotic good. They stormed the keep, slaughtered the

guards, executed the baron and his family, and made off with some fine suits of armor and tapestries. Pelltar, the baron's wizard, finally set them straight, but the damage had been done. I decided to use the misunderstanding as a springboard for a follow-up adventure in which the heroes tracked down the source of the false rumor and discovered an evil thieves' guild seeking to gain a foothold in Restenford. In hindsight, that was a pretty clever idea for a 15-year-old!

In the intervening 25 years, I've become quite the practiced liar. Whenever the characters arrive in a new village, town, or city, I pepper them with local rumors—some true, some false. As any practiced liar knows, the secret to adding rich layers to any D&D campaign is the aforementioned happy blend of truth and deception. If all of my NPCs lied to my players all of the time, that wouldn't be a fun experience for anyone. Similarly, if the NPCs told the truth constantly, the players would take everything—including my campaign—at face value. In the real world, drama is natural outcome of humans trying to ascertain what's true and what's false, and the emotions and confusion that come when humans are dishonest with one another. Why should the drama of my campaign be any different?

Lessons Learned

I love the roleplaying opportunities that arise when players attempt to deceive monsters and NPCs in my campaign, and as they say, turnabout is fair play. When it comes right down to it, there are basically two kinds of untruths your NPCs can tell the player characters:

- **Deliberate deceptions**
- **Unintentional misinformation**

When in doubt, tell the players things that are true. Even the old D&D adventures tended to have more true rumors than false ones. Players don't like to be constantly deceived any more than they enjoy swimming in shark-infested waters. However, when the time comes to deceive them, don't let your evil NPCs have all the fun. Even good and unaligned NPCs have reasons to lie, and your campaign world is full of shamefully misinformed benefactors, inveigling politicians and court jesters, and good people who harbor dark secrets.

Basically, you need to ask yourself, why would the NPC say something untrue? If the NPC has anything to gain from deceiving the heroes, then you have just cause to lie on that NPC's behalf. However, in some respects "unintentional misinformation" is the more interesting way to go, since the characters are dealing with an NPC who is sincere (and therefore harder to threaten with violence). Recently in my Monday night game, two characters were killed by a death knight wielding a soul-draining sword. An evil-aligned NPC named Osterneth said she had the means to free the souls trapped within the blade and, in the process of trying to set them free, accidentally destroyed the sword and souls contained within. Some of the players felt confident enough in their characters' high Insight skill checks to believe Osterneth was being sincere, and she truly was. The lesson: Even the DM's all-knowing, all-powerful NPCs make mistakes sometimes, and it's harder for players to justify killing an NPC who speaks honestly.

Let's take a little test, shall we, using another example from my Monday night campaign: In the world of Iomandra, wood is rare and highly prized for shipbuilding. Talia Winterleaf, whose father owns a wood-trading consortium called the Winterleaf Coster, has bribed a clan of frost giants into attacking an iron mine owned by the Ironstar Cartel, a rival consortium; Talia did so in order to prevent the cartel from finishing a prototype iron ship that it hopes will impress the Dragovar Empire enough to win a lucrative shipbuilding contract. The heroes learn of the plot, confront Talia, and threaten to take down the Winterleaf Coster unless she pulls the giants out of the mine. Talia does as they wish and promises not to interfere with the Cartel's shipbuilding operation any further. It's also worth noting a minor complication that works in the party's favor: Talia has genuine feelings for Kithvolar, the party's elf ranger (played by Jeff Alvarez). So the question is: Is Talia lying?

The jury's still out, but in this case my instinct is to say no—she's speaking the truth. The players already have sufficient cause to believe she's dishonest, and thus it's more surprising that Talia will be true to her word. Also, her feelings for Kithvolar help to tip the scale in the party's favor, and her fondness for the elf ranger would realistically impact her decision. But don't worry—I haven't gone soft. Talia can't speak for her father or the rest of the Winterleaf Coster, who will no doubt continue to make the players' eyes roll with their sinister business practices.

Next week, we discuss what to do when a character dies suddenly and leaves behind untold stories and unfinished business. The campaign marches on, but will it ever be the same?

Until the next encounter!

C'est La Vie

9/15/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

When last we left the party, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) had led his stalwart companions into the Elemental Chaos to recover the fabled cutlass Fathomreaver, which he hopes will unite Iomandra's divisive Sea Kings under his banner.

The quest culminates in an epic fight aboard the Maelstrom, an elemental warship commanded by the dragonborn warlord Vantajar. With Fathomreaver in hand, the evil warlord cuts down Kael, the party's deva cleric (played by Chris Champagne), but it's Deimos who deals the final killing blow and slays Vantajar.

As the warlord's blood spills across the deck, the water elemental bound to the vessel is released and wreaks havoc. The elemental unleashes its fury upon the ship itself, breaking it in two. As the Maelstrom goes down in a sea of acid, the surviving heroes escape into an extradimensional space but are forced to leave their dead behind. . .

This week's installment tackles a question posed by "Arbanax" in response to a previous column. Arbanax's question, which I'm paraphrasing below, had to do with the untimely death of one of the characters in my long-running Wednesday night game:

> *"I am intrigued as to how you handled the cleric's death, seeing as he'd been part of the campaign for so many levels. I assume he had a backstory and other stuff left unfulfilled. How do you handle this?"*

Fantastic question!

The characters in my campaign live and die by their own actions (although the luck of the die also plays its part). When a character is killed off, particularly at higher levels, they can leave behind a lot of unfinished business. I always give the player the interesting choice of continuing to play the character or trying something new. There are plenty of D&D plot devices to revive a dead character, and we've even built races and classes for players who want their characters to come back in a slightly different light (the revenant springs to mind).

In my group, I have players who invest heavily in their characters and are crestfallen or downright pissy when death becomes them. I also have players with very little emotional investment in their characters; they look forward to injecting new characters into the party mix. As a player, I very much fall into the latter camp. As the DM, I have no feelings about it one way or the other. In my opinion, players should be allowed to play what they want to play (within reason). I don't rule their imaginations, and there are very few character concepts my campaign can't accommodate with a little bit of forethought.

Chris Champagne joined the Monday night group in the middle of the campaign's paragon tier, and Kael, his deva cleric, actually died twice. The first time was during a Halloween-themed episode involving a killer plant and several enslaved "pod people." (As a fun aside, the other characters used a special potion to reanimate Kael until he could be raised from the dead, giving Chris the chance to play a zombified version of Kael for the extent of the adventure.) Kael's second death came at the hands of the dragonborn warlord Vantajar in the Elemental Chaos, and as a further insult, Kael's body was cast overboard and dissolved in a sea of acid.

Deva characters have a built-in rebirth mechanic, but in this instance, Chris decided the time had come to put Kael aside and try something new—this despite the fact that Kael was close to unlocking the secrets of a past life in which he was the loyal manservant of a young princess who would eventually become the Raven Queen! Now, it's possible that Kael has been "reborn" somewhere (as devas are wont to do), and so there's still a slim chance that he might reappear before the campaign concludes, but Kael's story basically ended when Chris decided to play Kosh, his infernal pact warlock with the Prince of Hell epic destiny. The fact that Kael's story is incomplete doesn't raise my hackles; in a game in which heroes die, it's not always possible to get perfect closure. You end up trading closure for shock as the surviving characters realize, "OMG, he's dead!" A sudden death might cut short that character's story, but hopefully it gives his surviving companions the newfound impetus to press on despite their trepidation.

My campaign occasionally takes a hit whenever a character dies, usually because I have storylines tied to that specific character that have nowhere left to go. *C'est la vie.* In Kael's case, he had found a relic (a bronze raven mask from a bygone age) that triggered flashbacks of his past life as a royal manservant, and we had just begun to explore that past life and Kael's discovery of the Raven Queen's true name. Also, one of the campaign's major villains, a rakshasa named Chan, had strong ties to the Kael character—they were enemies in a past life. Luckily for the campaign (and unfortunately for the players), Chan has made enough enemies in the party that he's still "in play" as far as I'm concerned. Had this not been the case, Chan might have fallen by the wayside.

If my Wednesday night campaign has one structural flaw, it's that many of the big story arcs hinge on certain lynchpin characters. No offense to Mat Smith, but if Garrot the fighter was crushed to death by a falling tarrasque, the villains steering the campaign

wouldn't even slow down to take a picture. Some characters are defined more by their personality or abilities than by their narrative importance. On the other hand, if Deimos died, the entire focus of the campaign would shift, as the party's impetus to unite the Sea Kings is mostly driven by Chris Youngs' character.

(But you know what? As I write this, part of me is so excited by the very idea that I'm half-tempted to drop a tarrasque on Deimos just to watch the campaign cartwheel off a cliff or take one last unexpected turn in the back end of epic tier.

Of course, that would be wrong.)

That said, over the years I've encountered the odd character I've wanted to kill off—usually because the character was unlikeable, unbalanced, or underwhelming in the personality department (much like those poor red-shirt-wearin' sods in *Star Trek*). I try to resist the urge, since that's the DMing equivalent of "bad form" and is usually counterproductive—the player just rolls up an even more asinine or useless character.

Lessons Learned

Much has been written on the topic of "coping with character death," and at the risk of throwing more wood on that fire, it's only the DM's problem when the player is left feeling unsatisfied. Your campaign will survive and metamorphose regardless, but will the player want to continue partaking of it? If the player wants to continue exploring the facets of the character or feels that there's an untold story left to tell, then the DM's task should be to make the player happy. If the player shrugs his or her shoulders and starts talking about a cool new character idea, then your challenge becomes how to make this new character feel like he or she belongs in your campaign.

- **The decision to revive a dead character should fall to that character's player. If you can't think of a clever way to bring back the character, there's always the Raise Dead ritual.**
- **If the player decides to "move on," be kind to the dead character's memory: Let the character's heroism echo through your campaign.**
- **Your campaign is stronger than any one character. When a character dies and leaves unfinished business behind, declare "C'est la vie" and move on.**

Kael died protecting his friends in the greatest battle of the Wednesday night campaign to date. Chris wisely believed that Kael would achieve no greater death, and so he let the character go. My responsibility as DM is to keep Kael "alive" by evoking his name from time to time in ways that make his sacrifice meaningful. A saddened NPC might remark on Kael's absence, an emissary from the Shadowfell might reassure Kael's companions that their lost cleric has taken his place by the Raven Queen's side, or a campaign villain might remind the heroes how weak and vulnerable they've become without their deva cleric to back them up. It's also a tasty bit of irony that the party's escape from the sinking ship was facilitated by an exodus knife which Rodney Thompson's character lifted from Kael's corpse, so the party has a useful memento mori to remind them of their bygone friend.

As a final aside, Kael wasn't the only character who perished in the climactic battle with Vantajar.

Many of the characters came close, but a human pirate named Armos (played by Nacime Khemis) also died a player-imposed "permadeath." Armos had been introduced several sessions earlier after Nacime's primary character—a warforged warden named Fleet—was abducted by Vecna cultists wishing to study the "living construct." I'm pretty sure that Nacime knew Fleet would be back eventually and that, at some point, he would be playing two characters. Armos wasn't around long enough to win the hearts of his companions or carve out a major character arc for himself, so it remains to be seen whether his death has any lasting impression. Years after a campaign concludes, it's perfectly natural for DMs and players to remember certain characters more readily than others, much as our real-world history judges heroes as popular or unsung.

Until the next encounter!

The Invisible Railroad

9/22/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

As they edge toward the end of the paragon tier, the Monday night group confronts and slays various evil members of the Shan Qabal, a powerful society of wizards, in the sunken city of Io'halador. Deep within the Shan Qabal fortress they encounter a warforged emissary of Vhalt, a secret kingdom protected by the evil god Vecna. The warforged poses no threat and claims to have a message for the leaders of the Dragovar Empire, which has been in disarray since the emperor disappeared along with his flagship—one of the great mysteries of the campaign.

My players immediately get the sense that this warforged is not some throwaway NPC but rather an important figure in the campaign—someone the DM has taken the time to develop. He has quirks and complex emotions, and several Insight checks confirm that he clearly means the party no harm. Perhaps for this reason, the heroes allow the warforged to tag along, but they are suspicious of its motives and eventually decline to escort it to the capital, at which point the warforged bids farewell and tries to leave the party. Out of the blue, Bruce Cordell's tiefling warlock attacks! The other players are surprised by Melech's snap decision but join the fray. As the warforged drops to 0 hit points, a magical docent planted in its chest causes the warforged to disintegrate, leaving nothing behind and no clue about the message it was supposed to deliver.

Players never cease to surprise me.

Although I think it's possible to run a campaign that is 100 percent driven by the players, I'm not the kind of Dungeon Master who can relinquish narrative control to the point where I'm simply reacting to the players' desires and "winging it" week after week. I like coming up with adventure ideas and stringing them together to form a cohesive arc that unfolds over multiple levels. When I plan out an adventure, I usually have a good idea where, when, and how it will end—assuming the heroes don't get sidetracked or TPK'ed en route. I like to call it my invisible railroad.

The worst kind of adventure, in my humble opinion, is one that railroads the player characters—which is to say, one that denies them any opportunity to affect change through their actions or decisions. Players can see a railroad from a mile away, and they are well within their rights to steer clear of it. Even in its simplest form, D&D is all about making choices and dealing with the consequences: Do we go right or left? Climb down the pit or avoid it? Slay the guard or bribe him? Even with my years of experience running D&D games, I've designed encounters that unfold exactly as planned by making player choice irrelevant—and shame on me for doing it! Such encounters usually end with disappointment.

That said, a D&D campaign is basically a series of quests that move the heroes from one destination to another, and if you want the player characters at Point A to visit Point B before, say, Point Q, then a track is a handy tool for getting them where they need to go. The trick (and yes, it is a trick) is to make sure that the players never feel as though they're being carried along by the story.

When DMs ask me how I keep my campaign on track, I tell them that when I plan out the events of a

game session, I'm basically laying down an invisible track that I hope my players never see. This track is what guides my campaign toward its intended destination. If all goes perfectly, my players will make decisions and take actions that push the story farther along this track until, finally, I've gotten them from Point A to Point B. Of course, events rarely unfold as planned—you can't lay down an invisible track and expect your players to follow it. The track is for my benefit, not theirs. Its sole function is to remind me of the intended destination and how far off track the campaign has gotten.

To help steer the campaign back onto the invisible railroad, I use signposts. You might call them nudges, hints, or clues. No matter how far off track the heroes stray, they will at some point see an arrow-shaped signpost that says, in not so many words, "This way." More appropriately the signpost takes the form of a rumor, a helpful or insightful NPC, a corpse that comes with a clue, a sudden and unprovoked attack, or some other plot device that tells the players where they should go next. Eventually it will dawn on the players that Oh, the DM is telling us the adventure is THIS way, or even better, it'll present them with a choice designed to help steer the campaign back on track.

In my Monday night game, for example, I decided to introduce a warforged NPC with tons of important information about the campaign—first and foremost that the kingdom of Vhalt, which was supposedly destroyed by the Dragovar Empire eons ago, has risen from the ashes (with a little help from Vecna). Not only has Vhalt created an army of warforged—living constructs empowered with the souls of the dead—as a prelude to war, Vhaltese agents have kidnapped Emperor Azunkhan IX in an effort to destabilize the Dragovar Empire. The warforged emissary killed by the heroes represented a rogue faction in Vhalt that sought peace, not war. He was under orders to inform the Dragovar leadership of their emperor's whereabouts—and because he followed orders to the letter, he was reluctant to confide in the heroes. (And, truth be told, they took no strides to gain his trust.) My hope was that the heroes would learn enough of this information, through roleplaying or other means, to track down and rescue the emperor and be lauded as champions of the empire, but alas. . . . I had banked on the Monday group's tendency to roleplay its way around a problem and was quite surprised when battle erupted.

Rather than have the warforged break character and spill the beans just to keep the story on track, I took the "Well, let's see where this takes us" approach. Several game sessions have passed, and the heroes still haven't gotten back on track, but that's because they've stumbled on another invisible railroad tied to a totally different campaign story arc—one involving a threat from the Far Realm. However, every so often I place a signpost that gently nudges them in the direction of Emperor Azunkhan and his Vhaltese captors. These signposts provide subtle reminders of Vecna's (ahem) hand in the unfolding campaign. My most recent signpost takes the form of another NPC who has ties to Vhalt and some information about the missing emperor. Enough time has passed since the warforged incident that I can introduce this new NPC without my players feeling force-fed, and although the heroes have yet to question her, I feel confident that my patience will be rewarded. And if they kill her, okay—at least they'll have a corpse upon which to cast a Speak with Dead ritual!

Figure 1: The Railroad

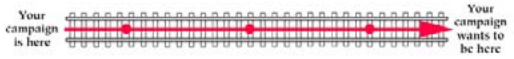


Figure 2: Derailment

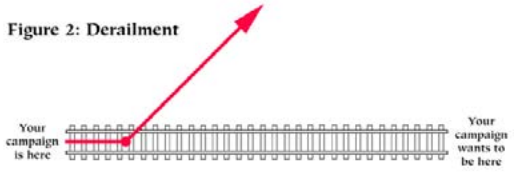


Figure 3: Best Case Scenario

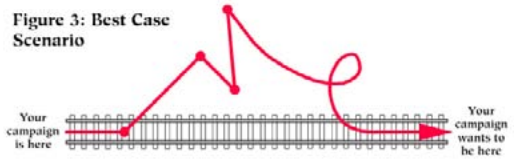


Figure 1: The good news is that the players have done exactly what you expected them to do. The bad news is that they probably feel railroaded and have no way to affect the outcome of the campaign.

Figure 2: The good news is that the players are making decisions that affect the campaign. The bad news is that you don't know how to steer them back on track.

Figure 3: The good news is that you're allowing players to chart their own path while cleverly steering them toward your intended destination. The bad news is that you're exhausted from all the fun everyone is having.

Lessons Learned

Dungeon Masters who take the time to plan adventures in advance share a common nightmare: At some point during the adventure, the players veer off track. Sometimes it happens unintentionally—the players simply do something you hadn't anticipated. Other times they do it maliciously, to test or thwart you. I never lose sleep over this sort of thing; in fact, I think part of the fun of being the DM is watching the players derail my campaign and figuring out ways to steer it back on track.

When your campaign goes off the rails, here's what I recommend you do:

- **Don't worry, be happy! As long as you don't freak out, your players might not even realize that the campaign has gone awry.**
- **Be patient. Let the players stray. Let them explore the consequences of their actions.**
- **Place subtle signposts that help guide your players back toward the desired destination.**

I've found that when players feel as though they can make real choices that affect the outcome of an encounter or an adventure, they are less likely to maliciously ruin my campaign. Patience is the key—if you remain calm and don't show panic or fear, your players will think that you're prepared for any contingency. Also, they'll realize in no time that you're not trying to lead them by the nose. As they fumble about and chase other distractions, you'll see opportunities to steer them back on track, or, conversely, you'll discover that the direction they've decided to go is more interesting than the one you had planned.

Next week, I'll talk about my three-arc approach to campaign building, which is, fundamentally, the idea of building a campaign around three big stories. I mention it here only because it dovetails nicely with the invisible railroad concept insofar as it gives you more tracks for your players to follow. If they fly off the rails, it's often easier to steer them toward another invisible track than to try to lead them back to the one they just left. Consider that food for thought.

Until the next encounter!

The Covenant of the Arcs

9/29/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are sailing westward, hoping to rendezvous with the Knights of Ardyn, a group dedicated to wiping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. It seems the knights have captured a mind flayer ship called a nautilus, and they need the heroes' help to operate it. The knights have decided that the empire needs their help to overcome a threat to the west: a Far Realm incursion brought about by an eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor, who plans to free evil, godlike entities trapped in the stars, transport them to Iomandra, and provide them with living receptacles as bodies. The mad warlock has help from a powerful starspawn called Allabar and, oh, about fifty thousand mind flayers. To top it all off, the mind flayers have been launching raids on imperial settlements, capturing citizens and transforming them into degenerate foulspawn. Clearly, the heroes and the Knights of Ardyn have their work cut out for them, and their best hope is to find and slay Allabar, which will unleash a psychic shock wave that kills every mind flayer on the planet. The captured nautilus will enable the knights and the heroes to slip behind enemy lines and reach their quarry undetected.

En route to the rendezvous, the heroes' ship is attacked not by mind flayers but by three marauding vessels flying the flag of Sea King Senestrago. The heroes have been a thorn in Senestrago's side for many levels, and the Dragovar Empire is too distracted by the mind flayer threat to deal with the fact that Senestrago is openly attacking those he perceives as his enemies, including other Sea Kings.

As a further complication, the heroes have aboard their vessel an emissary of Vecna. This helpful lich, who wears the face of a noblewoman and travels with a changeling manservant (played by Peter Schaefer), hails from Vhalt, a secret kingdom that lies beyond a towering wall of deadly fog to the east called the Black Curtain. The heroes are among the few living souls who know of Vhalt's existence, and they suspect that Vhalt might be responsible for the kidnapping of the Dragovar Emperor—an act that has caused great instability within the empire, particularly in light of the mind flayer threat to the west.

I hinted at this week's topic in last week's article, which was about managing a campaign that's "gone off the rails." The smartest thing I ever did as DM was to build my current campaign on a foundation made up of three story arcs that together form an interlocking narrative—a kind of triptych, if you will. I used a similar three-arc structure in my previous 3rd Edition campaign, and it worked out so well that I kept the idea when plotting out the "big stories" in my 4th Edition world of Iomandra.

A campaign arc is a big story. Its impact is measured from the beginning of the campaign to the end, unlike the hundreds of other stories in the campaign that might end after one game session or after a few levels. Case in point: The Monday night group's

enmity with the Horned Alliance thieves' guild was a story that fueled many great moments in the paragon tier, but it wasn't big enough and didn't last long enough to be a campaign arc. However, many smaller stories are actually branches of a campaign arc, and good ones often can link two or more campaign arcs together. The Horned Alliance was made up of tiefling rogues who hated the Dragovar Empire, for it had not only destroyed the tiefling kingdom of Bael Turath but enslaved its people for generations. The thieves' guild offered sanctuary to a group of "kraken cultists" who were staging terrorist attacks against the empire by deploying Far Realm mines to blow up Dragovar ships. Where did they get these mines, you ask? From the mind flayers, of course—which ties directly to one of my three campaign arcs.

The three campaign arcs of the Iomandra campaign are as follows:

- **War erupts in the west when a star pact warlock triggers a Far Realm incursion that threatens the Dragovar Empire and the entire world.**

- **A secret kingdom to the east, long thought destroyed, is resurrected by Vecna and kidnaps the Emperor in an attempt to destabilize the Dragovar Empire—for reasons unknown.**
- **As cracks begin to form in the Dragovar Empire, evil political forces conspire to seize power, and bickering Sea Kings (the merchant lords of Iomandra) become increasingly hostile toward one another.**

Basically, I have a **war story** (the war against the Far Realm threat to the west), an **intrigue story** (the secret kingdom to the east), and a **political story** (boiling feuds and unbridled power-mongering in the wake of the emperor's disappearance).

I chose these three stories because I wanted to center my campaign around an empire in decline (a nod to ancient Rome, I suppose), and how does one go about showing an empire in decline? Well, a war going badly is good for starters. War is dramatic, and this is the second campaign in a row where I've used war as a pervasive theme, but I don't think you need a war to make a campaign interesting. Eberron is set in the aftermath of war, and it's the fear of another war that provides most of the tension. I also love, love, love intrigue—situations when the line between "friend" and "enemy" is indistinct, and players don't always know whom to trust. The "secret kingdom" campaign arc was the last one to fall into place, and honestly I had no clue what the secret kingdom was or what its ultimate goals were. (I trusted that the answers would come to me later.) The Black Curtain began as a source of rumors, a mysterious barrier that seafarers avoided. At the end of the heroic tier, the heroes found a journal containing the first hint of something on the other side of the Black Curtain, and it wasn't until mid-paragon tier when the characters had their first encounter with someone from the "other side." That's a roundabout way of saying that not all three arcs need to be fully fleshed out from the get-go, nor must they vie for equal attention. It's OK if one arc is "hazier" or less dominant than the others.

It's also OK, by the way, to have adventures and encounters that have nothing to do with your three campaign arcs. Tying every game session to an arc is like fighting troglodytes week after week: The whole campaign starts to reek. It's been my experience that the player characters become more invested (perhaps entwined is a better word) in the campaign arcs as they become more powerful and influential. During the heroic tier, I was running a lot more stand-alone episodes than I am in the epic tier. Were I to compare it to, say, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, it would be the difference between seasons 1–3 and seasons 4–7. The first three seasons of *DS9* were mostly stand-alone stories, with occasional forays into the major series arcs. By the time we got into the later seasons, there were fewer one-off episodes and more attention given to the major arcs—the war against the Dominion, the protection and restoration of Bajor, and the religious awakening of Benjamin Sisko. I think that's natural. Most campaign arcs can only be resolved by high-level characters.

Unless, of course, your campaign is short. It's probably worth noting that if I had I decided to end my campaign at level 10 instead of level 30, I probably wouldn't have needed three campaign arcs. There might be some correlation between the number of tiers in the campaign and the number of campaign arcs it needs. I've never run a campaign that climaxed at the end of the heroic tier, but I think one campaign arc would probably suffice. Having two or three seems unnecessary and would likely leave the campaign and the players unfulfilled.

Lessons Learned

The benefits of having multiple campaign arcs in a long-running or multitier campaign are many. First and foremost, it's like having slightly overlapping safety nets; no matter what the players do, their choices have a pretty good chance of landing them smack-dab in the middle of one of your campaign arcs eventually. The arcs are so encompassing and pervasive as to be nigh unavoidable, and if your players are clearly turned off by one arc, they have two others to choose from. Having multiple arcs gives players opportunities to decide which threat they care about the most, and I promise you, each player will have his or her own opinion on the matter, based on which arc ties in most closely with that player's character. Having three arcs also makes your campaign feel less like a "one-trick pony." Finally, there's the benefit of allowing you, the campaign's primary storyteller, to entangle plot threads and create opportunities or occasions when two or more arcs intersect.

I take immense pleasure in watching my players react as their characters reach those cool points where two or more big stories come together, or those points when they're forced to make a tough choice about which battle to fight. In my campaign, my players are constantly confronted by the reality that they can't always deal with everything. In that respect, having multiple campaign arcs provides verisimilitude, insofar as the players must face the consequences of choosing their battles.

Will the Monday night group resolve all three arcs by the time they reach level 30? I'm not sure. I doubt it. However, as the campaign rockets toward the finish line, I find myself spending a lot of waking hours pondering this very question. In my life, I've only ended a campaign five, maybe six, times. I'm not an expert in campaign resolution. After setting three big arcs in motion and watching them play out over 25 levels, I'm worried about these last five levels and how each arc will resolve itself. Ultimately, I think, everything ties back to the idea of *players making choices:* If they decide to travel west and overcome the Far Realm threat, they will have accomplished something truly epic and brought peace and stability to the world. That does leave behind some unfinished business, however; but maybe it's OK for some campaign arcs to continue on past the life span of the game. Years from now, while railing against some new campaign threat I've concocted, my players will reflect back on "the Iomandra years" and imagine what what might have happened if their characters had made the other choice, and that by itself is pretty cool.

Still, the perfectionist in me wants to tie off every single plot thread and bring every arc to a fitting end. It still bugs the hell out of me that *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ended without Bajor joining the Federation. That was the reason why Benjamin Sisko was sent to Deep Space Nine in the first place! Still, that Dominion War arc was pretty amazing.

Until the next encounter!

Setups and Payoffs

10/6/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Epic tier. The heroes are on a collision course with Starlord Evendor, an eladrin warlock who plans to free a bunch of evil star-gods from their celestial prisons. Unfortunately for the heroes, they possess some information that Evendor needs, and so the villain dispatches one of his apprentices and a strike team of mind flayers to retrieve it one way or another. Despite their clever infiltration of the party's ship, Evendor's evil agents are swiftly dealt with and his apprentice captured.

After interrogating the prisoner, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) decides it would be prudent to "off" her, or, at the very least, toss her overboard. Ravok (Andrew Finch's new goliath battlemind character) thinks Evendor's apprentice might be more useful as a prisoner than a corpse, and so he urges Deimos not to be hasty. Deimos reluctantly—yet wisely, as it turns out—opts to keep her alive a short while longer.

When Ravok tries to use a Sending ritual to contact some allies of his (a holy order of Pelor worshipers who are working against Starlord Evendor and the mind flayers), he quickly realizes something is amiss. They've been arrested on trumped-up charges of treason by the crew of the Bloodmonger, an imperial warship under the command of a dragonborn captain named Artana, whose ship (according

to intelligence reports) was lost during an intelligence-gathering mission in enemy waters. Not only has the warship's crew been partially lobotomized by mind flayers, but the captain and her first mate have been replaced by doppelgangers in league with Starlord Evendor.

Rather than risk losing prisoners in a bloody conflict, the heroes inform "Captain Artana" that they have one of Starlord Evendor's apprentices in their custody. Surely she is worth something to Evendor, and so the heroes begin negotiating a prisoner exchange.

My players learned a valuable lesson this week: sometimes it pays to take prisoners. As for me, I take no prisoners—at least not when it comes to throwing new challenges at my players and fishing for those "Wow!" moments that really pull players into the heart of the campaign. Ask yourself: when was the last time your players found themselves in the middle of a classic prisoner exchange? In the case of my Wednesday night group, it's been a long time, so it took my players a few minutes to get back into the "Oh, hang on, we don't need to kill everything just yet" groove.

As a DM and a storyteller, I live for those moments when something that happened earlier in the campaign helps, hinders, or haunts the PCs later on. It might be something a character did, something an NPC said, or some seemingly random occurrence that suddenly becomes significant. Sometimes it's accidental, sometimes it's planned, but when it happens, you know it instantly. You see it on your players' faces: the dawning horror, amusement, or relief brought on by the moment of revelation.

Novelists and screenwriters can illicit moments of revelation using a foreshadowing technique I like to call **the setup and the payoff**. The idea is that you establish something early in the story and then pay it off later on. In this week's example from my Wednesday night campaign, the surrender of Starlord Evendor's apprentice was the setup, and her value as a tradable commodity is the payoff. The players felt instant gratification because the story was rewarding them for not only keeping the evil apprentice alive but also for realizing they had the perfect bargaining chip. It's possible that one or more of the players saw it coming, but I don't think that diminished their enjoyment of the moment or made me feel any less brilliant.

It's like that moment in a James Bond movie when Q gives 007 a new gadget. You expect that the gadget will come into play at some point, and so you wait for the payoff. Sometimes in the heat of the narrative you forget that Bond has the gadget, so when it finally comes into play, there's a nice moment of surprise. The Aston Martin's ejection set in *Goldfinger* (1963) is a classic example. The wrist-mounted dart gun in *Moonraker* (1979) is another—and especially surprising because it comes into play not once, but twice. Conversely, if Q gave Bond gadgets that he never used, what would be the point? The writers know they can't set up something like that and not pay it off.

Of course, novelists and screenwriters don't have to worry about RPGers mucking with the story of their novels and screenplays. They have total control when it comes to planting their setups and payoffs. A Dungeon Master, on the other hand, doesn't have complete control of the story and can't always predict what the heroes will do next. Consequently, not every setup has the perfect payoff. If my Wednesday night heroes had thrown Evendor's apprentice overboard or killed her outright, the encounter with "Captain Artana" would have played out very differently.

A setup that hinges on the characters keeping a captured villain alive is risky, but there are other kinds of setups that are subtle and thus more likely to pay off later. For example, at this summer's live Acquisitions Incorporated game, I set up a mystery involving several crates of raw hamburger, which were delivered to the Darkmagic estate with no hint of who ordered or sent them. Later on, the heroes learned of the enmity between the New Hampshire Darkmagics and the Wisconsin Wortstaffs—and that most of the Wortstaff family were necromancers by trade. The big payoff came in the climactic battle, when the hamburger was transformed into four undead minotaurs by a Wortstaff necromantic ritual.

The time that passes between the setup and the payoff can vary. You don't want the payoff to happen too soon after the setup, but in a long-running campaign you can delay the payoff for months or years. In my Wednesday night game, the heroic-tier heroes were arrested for attacking a military weapons foundry. While in captivity, Rodney Thompson's character was tortured by a dragonborn priest of Tiamat, who replaced one of Vargas's eyes with a unique magic item called an *eye of vengeance*. The magic eye was supposed to be delivered to the island prison of Zardkarath, where it would find its way to an imprisoned, one-eyed dragonborn pirate named Vantajar. On the voyage to Zardkarath, Vargas and his companions escaped . . . and it wasn't until epic tier (nearly two years later) when Vantajar was released from prison and came searching for his missing eye.

Lessons Learned

Not every setup will pay off in a satisfying manner. However, this fact doesn't discourage me from planting seeds that will hopefully bear fruit in the future, because when the payoff happens, it's immensely gratifying and makes me appear so much smarter than I actually am.

Here are three classic D&D setups and payoffs which I use from time to time and which you're free to plunder for your home campaign:

Setup #1: The heroes find a strange word scrawled in blood on the floor, etched into a wall, or written on the inside cover of a spellbook or diary.

Payoff: The word turns out to be a password to bypass a magical trap or unlock a sealed vault, the command word to deactivate a golem, the true name of an evil fiend, or a clever anagram.

Setup #2: The heroes find a locket on the corpse of a slain NPC. It contains a tiny painted portrait of someone familiar or unfamiliar to them.

Payoff: The heroes come face-to-face with the figure portrayed in the locket—a distraught or vengeful lover, one of the heroes' relatives with a secret to share, or an NPC willing to reward the heroes for returning the locket and completing a quest.

Setup #3: The heroes find an intelligent magic item with a secret past.

Payoff: Someone recognizes the item in a future encounter and shares a bit of history that sheds light on the item's previous owner or the secret curse that haunts all who wield it.

Until the next encounter!

Love Letter to Ed Greenwood

10/13/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

A woman walks into a tavern. She's beautiful and voluptuous, wearing the finery of a noble and a devil-may-care smile. She prances around like she owns the place, flirts with the patrons, plays with her shoulder-length auburn curls, and finishes off a free tankard of mead in record time. A bard strums his lute, driving the free-spirited woman to dance, much to the delight of a dozen drooling admirers. When Kithvolar (played by Jeff Alvarez) slyly turns his head to admire her reflection on the nighttime glass of a nearby window, gone is the lady's striking beauty. In her place, he sees a twirling, dancing skeleton with bones of polished bronze.

One thing that classic fantasy stories have in common, apart from a preponderance of fantasy tropes, is an exhaustive cast of characters. Scores of characters populate J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Terry Brooks's *Shannara* series, and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* series. When one sets out to create a new world, it probably goes without saying that populating the world with fascinating characters is a priority. Few creative forces in the universe are better at this game than Ed Greenwood, whose stories are rich with timeless characters that totally belong in his world and yet never cease to surprise.

I'm in the third year of my Iomandra campaign. While my players joke about the "cast of thousands," the actual number of unique NPCs that they've encountered so far is closer to 750—which, I suppose, means that the 1,000 mark isn't beyond the realm of reason. Still, my list pales in comparison to Ed's panoply of Forgotten Realms characters and NPCs, which he has created over many decades. And yet, every time Ed introduces a new personality to the Forgotten Realms setting, there's always something about it that's novel (no pun intended).

For example, in an upcoming Eye on the Realms article, Ed introduces us to a beholder named Uldeth, whose physical form was nearly obliterated. All that remains of the creature are ten disembodied

eyestalks that hover in midair. That's something I've never seen done before, and you can bet that I'm going to spirit his creation out of Faerûn and drop Uldeth into my home campaign at the first opportunity.

Many DMs I've talked to have trouble coming up with interesting new NPCs, and even the best of us can't always conjure something out of thin air whenever a player character decides to stop some random schmo in the street and ask for his name and back story. But Ed can. I've witnessed it firsthand. He pulls names and hooks out of the ether. It's the gift of a creative genius and an experienced storywriter to turn a faceless entity who didn't exist two seconds ago into a fleshed-out character with more going on beneath the skin than the rest of us can imagine. Maybe "Joe Schmo" is actually Orvius Turlash, a necromancer in disguise, who's on his way to broker a deal with a corrupt city official to acquire bones and body parts from the local cemetery. Or maybe it's Griggly Muffinstock, a halfling adventurer who was ensorcelled by an archmage to always speak the truth, no matter how embarrassing or inappropriate. He might be looking for a way to rid himself of the "curse," or he might be performing a service to gain the archmage's favor. Granted, these are my ideas, not Ed's, but if you're familiar with Ed's works, you'll probably catch a whiff of Greenwood in these characterizations.

Lessons Learned

I've been following Ed's career (in a not-creepy way) since I was ten years old—long before I got to know the man personally and work with him professionally. Without even trying, Ed taught me two things about NPC creation:

- **The character's name can tell you a little something about the character and the setting.**
- **Distinctive physical traits and personality quirks are great, but an NPC needs only one thing to be captivating: a SECRET.**

I've already discussed names in an earlier article, and Ed is a master at conjuring them, but the second point is really the thrust of this week's column. One secret to creating awesome NPCs is to give them secrets. Secrets invest your campaign with intrigue and invite roleplaying. A secret can make the player characters want to get to know your NPC creation better. How did Uldeth end up without a body? Why is Orvius Turlash giving the adventurers nervous looks? Could he be heading for a secret rendezvous? What secrets can we learn from the annoyingly forthright Griggly Muffinstock? What did the halfling do to deserve such a curse? And finally, what's the deal with the dancing vixen whose true form Kithvolar glimpses in a window reflection?

Players who like to roleplay not only like to invest their own characters with secrets but also like to pry into the secrets of others, and I've found that a little mystery surrounding an NPC can fuel hours of tireless, unadulterated fun. At least, that's what Ed taught me (that, and when to use the word "vixen").

Until the next encounter!

3DNPC

10/20/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

I don't like it when NPCs steal the heroes' thunder, but if there's one NPC who could give the party a run for its money, it's Nyrrska. He's a retired dragonborn assassin who used to serve Tiamat, meting out vengeance in the name of his Dark Queen. At some point in his nefarious career, he miraculously survived a life-ending slash to the throat. A servant of Bahamut saved his life, and in the wake of this near-death experience, Nyrrska had an epiphany and repented. He forsook Tiamat and retired to the Temple of Bahamut, becoming a lowly acolyte. When the PCs showed up at the temple seeking refuge from Tiamat's assassins, Nyrrska took it upon himself to help them survive, at the risk of alienating his former associates. When the temple's high priest decided that the heroes were a worthwhile investment, he assigned Nyrrska to accompany them as Bahamut's emissary. His assassin skills were rarely put to use, but when the PCs finally won themselves a ship, Nyrrska's intimidating presence and raspy voice made him a great choice to keep the crew in line.

When the PCs made an enemy of Vantajar, the one-eyed dragonborn pirate warlord, Nyrrska understood why Bahamut had chosen HIM to watch over them. In one of those "too cool for skool" moments of the campaign, it was revealed that Nyrrska had tried to kill Vantajar once. That encounter left Vantajar short one eye and Nyrrska with a slashed throat.

Last week I talked about making nonplayer characters (NPCs) more interesting by giving them secrets, and at the risk of boring the masses, I'd like to continue exploring the topic of NPCs a bit more. It'll give me a chance to do something I haven't done very often: hearken back to some earlier columns and demonstrate how the pieces fit together.

Not every DM invents his or her own monsters, but all DMs invent their own NPCs. There's no way around it. Generic, nameless NPCs are easy enough to plunder, but they are inherently less compelling than campaign-flavored ones. Specific "named" NPCs have a lot more going for them, but the more hard-coded they are to a particular campaign world, the harder it becomes to transplant them. Yeah, I could file off Drizzt's name and include a scimitar-wielding drow ranger in my home campaign, but my players would think I'd finally run out of ideas. By the same token, the NPCs in my campaign aren't likely to fit well into someone else's campaign. Maybe it's just me, but there's just something awkward and uncomfortable about using someone else's NPCs. It's kind of like using someone else's dice or wearing someone else's socks. As a DM, I'm far more comfortable stealing and modifying a stat block than I am stealing another DM's concept for an NPC.

Fortunately, NPC creation doesn't have to be a chore. When I create an NPC on the fly (and let's be honest, most of mine are created this way), first comes the **name**, then the **secret**, then the **stats**, then the **voice**, and finally the **layers**.

NAME
|
SECRET
|
STATS
|
VOICE
|
LAYERS

Here's where I flash back to earlier articles . . .

Name: The hardest part, IMO. It takes a sharp DM to concoct appropriate and memorable names on the fly, and no, "Wizzy McWizard" and "Thundarr Super-He Man" don't qualify. If you've been reading this column week after week, you already know my tricks for coming up with names.

Secret: Campaigns are built on secrets. Without them, players have little incentive to explore the world and uncover its mysteries. And as we discussed last week, NPCs need secrets, too.

Stats: I rarely have time to create NPC stat blocks from scratch. Once I know the NPC's level, I can use the D&D Compendium or the "Monsters By Level" appendices in the various *Monster Manuals* to find an appropriate stat block which I can customize using various cheap tricks.

Voice: The NPC's voice is your voice, with or without a twist. You might add an accent or a throaty rasp, change the tempo or pitch, or use any one of a number of other simple tricks, or you might decide it's not worth the effort. Not every NPC needs a unique voice.

And the last piece of the puzzle . . .

Layers: That's layers, not lairs! (Sometimes NPCs need lairs too, but that's a topic for another week.) If all you need is a faceless NPC to remind your players that the world has other people in it, don't worry about adding layers. Layers are what you need to turn a "cardboard cutout" into a fleshed-out NPC as real and three-dimensional as the heroes.

At last, we arrive at the crux of this week's article—what I like to call "the 3D NPC." You've created an NPC and given him or her a name, a stat block, a secret, and a voice. The NPC is all dressed up and

ready to go! As he or she begins interacting with the player characters, you'll see opportunities to start adding layers to the NPC. Layers are great because (1) you don't need to add them right away and (2) you don't need to add them all at once.

Most layers have zero impact on the events of the campaign. They exist simply to add a touch of realism or complexity to an NPC. To be effective, a layer needs to paint the NPC in a different light, revealing a side or aspect of the character that's in some way surprising or unexpected. Here's a random table of layers that you can use for NPCs of any level, alignment, disposition, and importance:

Lessons Learned

I learned the importance of layers by watching serialized television dramas such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Lost*, *True Blood*, *Mad Men*, *Leverage*, and *Firefly*. Layers tend to show up in television series more often than in feature films because the writers, producers, and actors have more time to explore the various facets of the characters and revel in the complexity of their relationships.

Let's use *Firefly* for this week's example. In the first episode, we learn that Captain Malcolm Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) is a self-serving bandit with a chip on his shoulder because he fought a war and ended up on the losing side. He bucks authority and doesn't like it when people stick their nose in his business. He shies away from personal attachments, and the harsh frontier of space has turned his heart to ice. And yet, as the series unfolds, we discover his relationships are infinitely more complex and that he's both smarter and dumber than we initially surmised, depending on the situation and the circumstances. We see him at his best and worst. And then there's the character of Jayne (Adam Baldwin), a gun-toting halfwit who takes orders from Reynolds but has zero loyalty. Who could've guessed he'd turn out to be a pompom hat-wearing momma's boy?

In the context of a D&D campaign, a layer is something you add that casts your NPC in a new light. In some cases, the new layer invites players to adjust their opinions of the NPC. An evil brigand surrenders to the party to avoid being killed and turns out to be a friendly and sympathetic jokester while in custody. A half-orc innkeeper who's nothing but kind to wealthy adventurers shows little regard for his employees and bilks them out of their earnings. You get the idea.

Back to Iomandra . . .

You've already met Nyrrska, the dragonborn assassin who lurks in the shadows of the Wednesday night party. Now allow me to introduce you to another NPC from my Wednesday night campaign.

Tyranny (a.k.a. "Tyra") was introduced at the start of epic tier as a foil for Deimos, a tiefling sorcerer and ship captain played by Chris Youngs. After Deimos's ship was sunk, he forged a pact with Dispater to have the vessel returned to him. As part of the agreement, Deimos was forced to take Tyra, one of Dispater's consorts, as a concubine and swear to protect her against

d20 The NPC . . .

1	doesn't like children because they're reminders of an unfortunate childhood.
2	owns a collection of ukuleles, fiddles, and violins and plays them all beautifully.
3	used to be a sword swallower in a traveling circus or freak show.
4	has a "thing" for members of a particular race (such as elves or gnomes).
5	stutters when he or she lies.
6	knows everything there is to know about demonology and the Abyss.
7	is a hopeless romantic and matchmaker.
8	is obsessed with immortality and wants to be a vampire.
9	fakes an injury to gain sympathy or advantage.
10	talks in his or her sleep.
11	is sickened by the sight of blood.
12	claims to be of royal descent but hails from a common bloodline.
13	was raised by orcs, goliaths, or treants and picked up some odd habits.
14	visits the grave of a deceased loved one regularly.
15	looks after an ailing parent or elderly mentor.
16	makes dolls or carves wooden figurines, and gives them away as gifts.
17	is afraid of cats, heights, water, or the dark.
18	raises a child but isn't very good at it.
19	writes poetry.
20	is a kleptomaniac.

all harm. Tyra appeared in Deimos's bed one night as a voluptuous tiefling, although her "big secret" is that she's a polymorphed succubus. (For her stat block, I used the level 9 succubus advanced to level 25.)

Tyra's arrival set the other characters (and players) on edge, for Deimos had not consulted with them prior to cutting his deal with Dispater. There were some personality conflicts, but a deal is a deal—the heroes couldn't risk throwing Tyra overboard or killing her. And so, she became a necessary evil.

Tyra's mission is to find some way to resurrect the dead tiefling empire of Bael Turath, but that's a fairly long-term goal. The first layer I added to her was an unflinching lawfulness. She learns the game and always plays by the rules. She needed to prove to her detractors that she was a valuable addition to the crew but couldn't magically charm or dominate them without breaking Dispater's contract. These shackles forced her to rely on her natural charms rather than her fiendish ones. She was blunt when it paid to be honest, quiet when it paid to be demure. Whenever the PCs reached an impasse and weren't certain how to proceed, Tyra would step forward and offer a carefully considered insight that could only come from an NPC gifted with a shred of the DM's prescience. Honesty isn't what the players expected from her at all. That, and the fact that she likes to take her clothes off and walk around in the nude (don't we all).

When it comes to adding new layers, the DM doesn't have to do all the work. Sometimes a player will find a way to add layers to an NPC by way of association. In Tyra's case, another layer was added after two party members died. Chris Champagne decided he wanted his next character to be a Prince of Hell named Kosh, and so he concocted a background that suggested he and Tyranny were old acquaintances. To bring Chris's new character into the fold, I had Tyranny summon him from the Nine Hells. Afraid that the party was no longer strong enough to survive the trials and tribulations ahead, she convinced Deimos to let her cast the summoning ritual using drops of mortal blood taken from various willing crewmembers. I never expected her to have a history with a character other than Deimos. When your players take to an NPC in this way, you know you're doing something right. It's icing on the cake.

Despite the fact that she's a succubus in disguise, Tyranny has become genuinely fond and protective of the PCs—even the ones who don't trust her. Over the course of the epic tier, she's proven adept at spotting enemy deceptions (she is, after all, a master of deceit). This penchant coupled with her unwillingness to deceive the party elevates her from a mere companion to an equal. Having been stifled by the tyrannical hierarchy of the Nine Hells, she doesn't take her newfound equality lightly, but in her heart, she's still a succubus. She could've summoned any Prince of Hell, but she chose Kosh for a reason. He's her ticket to restoring Bael Turath and fulfilling the terms of her agreement with Dispater. No matter how many layers she has, she must remain true to her essence.

While layers add new depth or dimension to a character, underneath all those layers the character must remain recognizable and true to its core. Malcolm Reynolds would not be Malcolm Reynolds without that chip on his shoulder, and Jayne would not be Jayne if he stopped being a dumbass. Similarly, the ex-assassin Nyrrska would lose his gravity if he burst into tears every time someone hurt his feelings. The next time you want to add a new layer to an NPC, remember: A layer is just icing. You can put tar on the cake instead of icing, but no one's gonna buy it.

Until the next encounter!

Boo Hoo

10/27/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes find a nautilus (a mind flayer ship) beached on the island of Sha'hadam. The ship's elder brain and crew are dead, killed by a mysterious psychic wave. The DM has just handed the PCs the means to an end—a ship with which they can infiltrate the mind flayer empire and reach their evil nemesis, Starlord Evendor. Peter Schaefer, who plays a changeling named Metis, discovers that he can operate the shipboard systems if he assumes the form of a mind flayer and sticks his tentacles into the pilot's control station, but he still needs the elder brain to provide the vessel's motive force. Imagine my surprise when the players hit upon the idea of asking Imazhia, their NPC companion (and a cleric of Bahamut), to cast an Animate Dead ritual on the elder brain!

The heroes are about to learn a painful lesson: Necromantic rituals and undead elder brains aren't to be trifled with.

Once they realized they needed the elder brain to power the ship, the Monday night players (to their credit) weighed the ramifications of raising it from the dead versus reanimating it. Ultimately they decided that the undead version would be easier to control, and under normal circumstances, they'd be right. But you can't throw "undead elder brain" at the DM (at least, not THIS one) and expect it to end well. Suffice to say, the elder brain was shocked back to "life" by Imazhia's ritual and immediately lashed out at the party. That's more or less how the last game session ended.

Next Monday is Halloween, and the game is off because several of my players have other commitments. On the one hand it makes me sad, but on the other hand I have another week to think about how I'm going to further torment my players. In the spirit of Samhain, this week I fearlessly don my Scary DM hat, so take the following "advice" with several grains of salt.

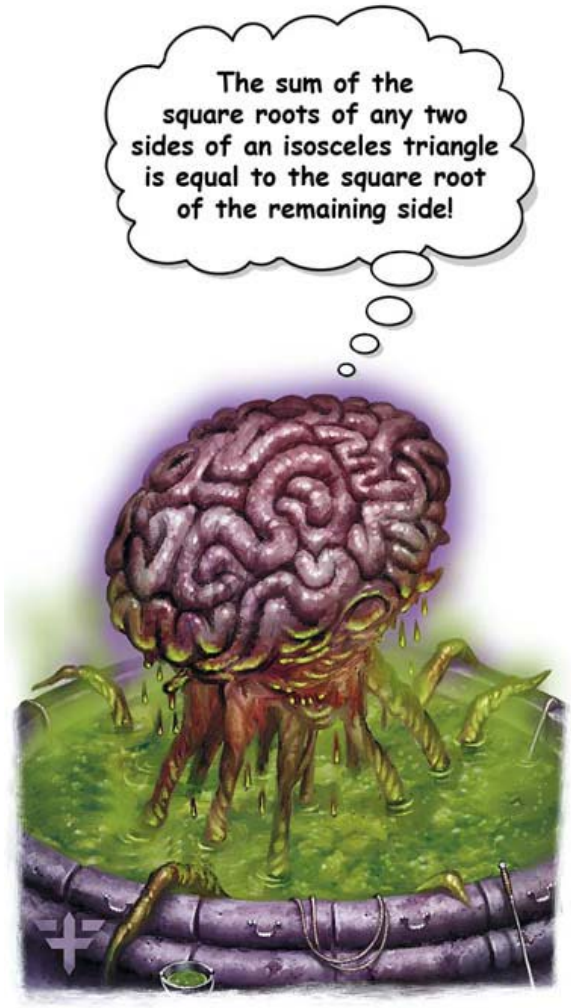
Here's my "top 5 list" of ways to torture players, with specific examples from the Monday night campaign:

Torture Tip #1: Give the players what they want, then take it away.

It's the oldest, nastiest DM trick in the book, and positively Gygaxian in its fiendish wickedness.

Early on in paragon tier, my players learned of the *Morkoth*, a ship moored at the docks in Io'galaroth that was "up for grabs." Its captain had been killed and its crew disbanded, leaving the ship ripe for the taking. After ridding the city of evil kraken-worshiping cultists, the heroes persuaded the city's magistrate to give them the *Morkoth* for keeps. However, by this time they had made an enemy of an unscrupulous ship captain named Lydia Taralan, who not only commanded a ship of her own but also a 30-foot-long iron shark golem. After Taralan chased them out of Io'galaroth, the heroes decided not to wage a ship-to-ship battle but instead used phantom steeds to bring the fight to Taralan on the deck of her own ship. Meanwhile, Taralan's iron shark golem laid waste to the undefended *Morkoth*, and it sank into the briny depths.

Free ships are great, but players appreciate helpful NPCs even more, particularly likeable ones who push obstacles out of the party's way, give them free stuff, or provide wise counsel. Imazhia, the cleric of Bahamut, is one such NPC. She receives portentous dreams that warn the PCs of impending danger, she cuts through the bureaucracy of the Dragovar Empire like a knife through a pumpkin, and she provides free healing without complaint. I'm just dying to kill her off, but I'm waiting for the perfect moment . . . the moment when her loss will be shocking and deeply felt. Or maybe I'll just have her arrested by a political



rival on suspicion of treason. Either way, the players won't be able to lean on her anymore.

My players also grew to like Lady Thariel von Zarkyn, a noblewoman who secretly belonged to a cult of Vecna. Thariel had conflicting loyalties and ultimately decided to use the secrets in her possession to help the PCs, so when her superiors told her to dispose of them, she took her own life instead. (Insert creepy DM cackle here.)

Torture Tip #2: Reward the players' accomplishments with logical negative consequences.

For every action, there's an equal and opposite reaction. Okay, so the PCs just slaughtered the dragon and took its stuff. What are the odds that the dragon's mother finds out what happened and puts a contract out on them? Pretty good, I think. And what about that evil merchant they killed? Surely the criminals to whom he owed large sums of money will want their pound of flesh. Learn a lesson from Greek mythology: For every head the heroes cut off, two more grow in its place.

In my campaign, the heroes recently befriended the Knights of Ardyn, a "friendly" terrorist organization committed to stamping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. In doing so, they've come to the attention of the Vost Miraj, the empire's equivalent of MI:6. The organization, which itself is riddled with corruption, already has an assassin in the party's ranks (played by one of the players, no less), and his buddies are moving in for the kill. This is what happens when you make friends with people who have enemies!

Torture Tip #3: Have that light at the end of the tunnel suddenly go out.

In my mind, that "light at the end of the tunnel" is actually a demented will-o'-wisp, baiting the players as it leads the characters toward their doom. As the DM, you have the power to make them feel like no matter what they do, they're no closer to reaching their ultimate goal or destination. When dismay sets in, but before the players become thoroughly discouraged and despondent, you shine rays of hope straight into their eyes to dazzle them before plunging them back into darkness.

The Monday group desperately wants to end the mind flayer threat and live happily ever after, but every time they achieve a victory, Starlord Evendor, their evil nemesis, uses the reality-altering power of an elder constellation to affect horrendous changes, in one instance depriving the players of their elemental warship and in another resurrecting an old enemy to confound them and slow their progress.

Torture Tip #4: Kill player characters offscreen, and throw their body parts to the other players like scraps of meat to wild dogs.

No, I'm not being metaphorical here. That's what I did to Melech, Bruce Cordell's tiefling warlock, when Bruce missed a session. In my campaign, player-less PCs become glorified NPCs and fuel for storytelling and suspense.

When players are absent in my game, their characters typically "fade into the background" or, if possible, run errands while the other characters tackle the problem at hand. By DM fiat, a guild of slavers managed to corner Melech while the other PCs were "adventuring," and at the end of the session they delivered his severed head to the party in a bloody bag. True, Melech was raised the very next session, but the shock value was worth it. *Head rolls across the floor AND . . . cut to black. See you next week!*

If you really want to take this idea to the next level, take a dead character and bring him or her back as an undead horror. That's what happened to Nick DiPetrillo's genasi swordmage, Yuriel, who had his soul devoured by a death knight's sword. A helpful lich named Osterneth offered to put an artificial heart in Yuriel's corpse and pump necrotic sludge through his dead veins, and though the other players objected, Yuriel's wife and first mate (a watersoul genasi NPC named Pearl) was determined to have her darling husband back, and so . . . say hello to Yuriel the vampire! Undead Yuriel didn't "survive" for many sessions. After dying heroically in battle, he had his heart ripped out (more or less) by a blue dragon sea captain, and Jeremy Crawford's character destroyed the heart with a *magic missile* to make sure it couldn't be used again.

Torture Tip #5: Thrust the PCs into situations they aren't equipped to handle.

If I want my players to squirm, I'll put them in a room where their swords and spells avail them not. It might be a room full of politicians discussing the future of the Dragovar Empire, or the hold of a ship containing a sentient Far Realm mine that they must disarm or outsmart before it blows them and their ship to bits.

I'm reminded of a particular "character moment" involving Jeff Alvarez, who plays a highly optimized fighting machine named Kithvolar. The elf ranger

does outrageous amounts of damage in combat and can practically solo your average encounter, but Jeff and Kithvolar are out of their element in noncombat situations. So imagine Jeff's surprise when Kithvolar "awakens" from his nightly reverie with blood on his swords and no memory of how it got there, followed by the discovery that he's murdering people in his "sleep" because the mind flayers put something in his brain. He can't stab the thing in his brain with a sword, at least not without killing himself, so what should he do? That, my friends, is torture.

Lessons Learned

I'm sure every DM who reads this article can empathize with my primal need to torment my players, and I'm fairly certain I'm not the only DM in the D&D multiverse whose campaign has a sadomasochistic undercurrent. Nothing wrong with giving the campaign an occasional jolt. My players relish the adversity that they and their characters are forced to overcome week after week. The scars they earn along the way will pay off at the end of the campaign, when the surviving PCs gaze at the smoldering ashes of their enemies and realize they've been through hell and withstood the horrors of death, loss, and mutilation. As long as everyone knows it's all in good fun, there's no love lost.

And on that note, here's another parting tip I'd like to share, a surefire way to torment your players: **Think twice before you throw them a bone.** Let the player characters be the instruments of their own demise. My players don't need much help from me to kill off their characters; they're perfectly capable of making ill-informed decisions and rolling a natural 1 on that final death save. When things go from bad to worse, some players expect the DM to jump in and contrive some clever escape for the character(s) in need, or fudge some die rolls in the party's favor. Scary DM says, "Mercy is for the weak!" Stun them by letting that third consecutive critical hit stand. Terrify them by letting the vicious death knight make that coup de grace attack and finish off the party leader lying unconscious at his feet. My players don't remember the time I cut them slack; they remember the horror of that moment when the death knight killed their beloved warlord while her companions wallowed in their own blood and pooped themselves.

Until the next encounter!

Catapult

11/3/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

In a previous session, the heroes captured the apprentice of their nemesis, Starlord Evendor, and agreed to trade her for several prisoners in the clutches of mind flayers. The prisoner exchange was going swimmingly until the illithids' sudden but inevitable betrayal, and although the heroes ultimately kicked ass, there were three "uh-oh" moments when things went from bad to worse.

The first "uh-oh" moment happened when reinforcements arrived in the form of a beholder named King Zorrb. The beholder arrived via Far Realm portal, cried out "Kneel before Zorrb!" and began shooting eye rays at everyone. The second "uh-oh" moment quickly followed when the beholder disintegrated Chris Youngs' character, Deimos. The third and final "uh-oh" moment occurred near the end of the fight, when Mat Smith's character, Garrot, grabbed King Zorrb by the eyestalks and catapulted himself through the Far Realm portal, dragging the beholder with him.

As they say in Hollywood, what an exit!

And that's the story of how Garrot, the dimwitted human fighter, was devoured by the Far Realm.

Most players would think twice about hurling their characters into the Far Realm, even if it meant saving another party member's life. But Mat doesn't play a smart character, and sometimes he has Garrot do things that don't make a lot of sense except, of course, to Garrot. Not surprisingly, Garrot has died and been raised from the dead many times over the course of the campaign, but this time there's nothing to raise. His body's lost.

Over the past four years, Garrot never really evolved much at all. In fact, while I pride myself on creating interesting "growth opportunities" for characters, I was pretty much at a loss when it came to thinking up good Garrot-centric episodes and adventures. Mat played him so dumb that no NPC could communicate intelligently with him, and Garrot had no attachments—even his companions didn't pay him much attention outside of combat. Garrot didn't even have a last name (or if he did, it never came up in play). He was like a coat rack with no hooks; there wasn't much to hang a story on. I also got the impression that after nearly four years of playing the same character, Mat was willing to throw Garrot on a limb just to see if it broke. Put another way, I don't think Mat would be surprised or horribly depressed if Garrot never returned.

I, on the other hand, am unwilling to let Garrot go.

Maybe it's because I feel like I've failed the character somehow. More likely it's because Mat's decision to hurl Garrot into the maddening void should be lauded and rewarded. If Garrot is well and truly dead, then the lesson to be learned from his actions is "Don't hurl your character into the Far Realm." However, I think it's more fun to tell players, "You never know what'll happen when you hurl your character into the Far Realm." Or put another way, "If you're willing to take a risk with your character, you might be pleasantly surprised by the outcome."

When it comes to building encounters, I have no qualms about layering on adversity, to the point where the players feel overwhelmed. I love having enemy reinforcements arrive just when things are starting to look up. I'm also happy to give players lengths of rope with which to hang proverbial nooses around their own characters' necks. However, before you accuse me of being cruel, note that my intentions are good: The goal, as I've said before, isn't to annihilate the party. No, the goal is to reward the players for taking risks.

I tend to think of characters as "chandelier bait," which is to say that if I hang a chandelier from the ceiling, I expect that at some point during the encounter a character will either (a) swing from it or (b) drop it on someone. The chandelier baits players into taking risks and making decisions they wouldn't otherwise consider. In Garrot's case, King Zorrb's Far Realm portal was the chandelier. It's also a plot device that can be used to catapult the campaign forward.

Speaking of catapults, there's something about Garrot that I almost forgot to mention—a seemingly inconsequential bit of character development instigated by Mat many years ago, back when the heroes were looking to buy a magical catapult for their ship. Mat decided that Garrot was fascinated by catapults. He even went so far as to procure a miniature catapult that Garrot would carry around with him and play with while his companions were doing "boring stuff" like obtaining quests and forging alliances. This utterly marvelous bit of nonsense became a running character gag. At some point, I expected the gag to pay off with Garrot firing himself out of a catapult or something equally ludicrous.

After debating whether or not to bring Garrot back, I finally decided to create a campaign "episode" set in the Far Realm. The adventure begins with Garrot plunging into Tyrak'n Bay and finding himself on the island of Kheth, where the campaign began. The island and its inhabitants are constructs of the Far Realm, familiar to Garrot but distorted by the plane's malign interpretation of his memories and his rather dimwitted view of the world. More importantly, all of Garrot's adventuring companions are there, including old characters who've been dead for many levels. The other players get to bring back some of their old characters to help Garrot escape from this nightmarish realm using the villain's giant catapult—because in his childlike mind, that's how Garrot would escape the Far Realm. Not only that, the players get to fight Starlord Evendor for the first time in the campaign, or rather, an effigy of him created by the Far Realm, and learn some of his dark secrets.

Lessons Learned

As a DM, if I'm going to create moments of seemingly insurmountable adversity, I also need to create moments of *opportunity* and be prepared for when my players attempt crazy-ass stunts. Although I'm well known for my elaborate schemes and plot twists, some of the most memorable and decisive moments of the campaign happened because of something the players did. I think it behooves every DM to remember that the players have a stake in determining how the campaign unfolds, and the best campaigns are inspired and propelled by the characters' actions and decisions.

So, to summarize:

- **It's the DM's job to create situations that encourage players to take risks.**
- **It's the DM's job to let players know that with great risk comes great reward.**

Until the next encounter!

Lloyd the Beholder

11/10/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes commandeer an illithid nautilus, and Peter Schaefer's changeling character figures out how to steer the ship by assuming the form of a mind flayer and inserting his tentacles into the pilot's control station. He convinces the ship's elder brain to take the vessel deep into enemy waters by first passing through the Far Realm. The DM (that's me!) has Peter's character make a handful of Dungeoneering checks to successfully navigate the Far Realm—and he fails spectacularly. As the ship drifts off course, it picks up three stray beholders who sound an awful lot like Kang and Kodos, the aliens from The Simpsons.

These particular beholders are Far Realm "couch potatoes" who've never visited the natural world and have never seen creatures like the PCs before. They're understandably confused and don't speak a word of Common, but there are enough PCs who know Deep Speech to glean that one of the beholders is named Lloyd. Still, past experience has taught the characters to attack beholders on sight. As battle erupts, out of nowhere the table conversation quickly degenerates into speculation about how beholders go to the bathroom. This, in turn, triggers a seemingly endless series of poop jokes that (excuse the pun) runs throughout the evening, culminating in the final moment when the warlock's eldritch blast kills poor Lloyd and the beholder lets out a resounding "Crap!" before exploding..

This week's column was hell to write because I always have trouble articulating the importance of humor in D&D games. There's a reason we don't tend to write funny D&D products, and that's because we designers and editors know for a fact that players and DMs bring their own humor to the game table, and no one seems to have trouble mining an otherwise straight adventure for comedy gold. In short, D&D players are, by and large, connoisseurs of comedy. Many were raised on Monty Python, for Pete's sake. I've never met a D&D player who was too lofty to appreciate a good fart or poop joke. (That is to say, a good fart joke, as opposed to a good fart.)

I'm the first to admit it: Although my campaign is occasionally lauded for its entwined plots, strange twists, and rocket pace, there are times when it wallows in poop jokes and is more akin to the games I used to run in junior high, which were lewd—and not in a cool Shakespearean way.

This week's session wasn't a very accurate snapshot of the Monday night campaign. It's more like one of those offbeat, funny episodes of *The X-Files* that pop up once or twice per season. Just as humor can insinuate itself into otherwise serious TV shows, comedy is an integral ingredient in my campaign, and I suspect most other campaigns as well, but it's more like a spice or seasoning than a main ingredient. I take my D&D campaign seriously in terms of its entertainment value to my players, which is to say, I put a lot of effort into making sure my players come back week after week by creating an immersive experience with lots of action, roleplaying, and surprises. However, it makes for a refreshing change of pace to inject a bit of silliness now and then.

Jeremy Crawford, who plays the party wizard, said it best in jest: "You've ruined beholders! We'll never look at them the same way again!" I place the blame squarely on Peter Schaefer's shoulders, for reasons I'll explain shortly. But first, a cautionary note . . .

Humor can spoil a campaign. I've seen it happen. It begins when a player decides to name his half-orc paladin "Sir Fartsalot" or when the characters enter a tavern in Waterdeep and see the cast of Cheers sitting at the bar. Sometimes humor takes you OUT of the campaign world, and it's hard to get players back into it. I remember playing in Monte Cook's remarkable Ptolus campaign and witnessing rare moments of frustration and disappointment whenever we, the players, cavalierly assigned silly monikers to villains who failed or declined to announce themselves by name. In my mind's eye, I can still see Monte shaking his head and replying "Yes, fine, whatever" after we decided to "name" one of his carefully crafted NPC villains "Mister Poopiehead." It's been my experience that bad names tend to stick, and once the players take to calling your NPC "Mister Poopiehead," there's very little you can do but flush Mister Poopiehead down the proverbial toilet and never speak of him again or fling him at the characters and hope they learn to take him seriously.

It's been my experience that, outside of the weekly dose of playful banter, humor is best used in small, judicious doses and in situations that work within the context of the encounter or scene. My decision to name one of the beholders Lloyd was spontaneous, as was the decision to model his voice and personality after Kang's. I was running what amounted to a random encounter (in other words, the beholders weren't crucial to the campaign in any way), I was in a weird mood, and these impromptu (and arguably ill-advised) decisions basically gave my players license to assign the other beholders similarly ludicrous names. Consequently, the party's journey through the Far Realm took an offbeat yet appropriately surreal turn. The players were a little taken aback at first, but I can't help but feel that "Lloyd" is a perfectly cromulent beholder name.

My style of DMing changes depending on the group of players I'm with. If you watched me DM a game for Acquisitions Incorporated and then participated in one of my home game sessions, you'd see subtle and not-so-subtle changes in my DM "performance." I tend to vary my DM style slightly even between my Monday and Wednesday night campaigns, as Peter Schaefer recently experienced when he crossed over from my Monday group to be a special guest star in my Wednesday night game. That's because I'm playing to a different audience, and different groups of players have different expectations. By comparison, when I run games at conventions, I tend to be a bit more "neutral" as a DM and put a lid on the poop jokes . . . at least until I get to know my players better.

My Monday group is, generally speaking, far less likely to wallow in filth than the Wednesday night group. The running gag is that that Monday group playfully disparages the Wednesday group for being a bunch of uncouth, self-destructive barbarians, whereas the Wednesday group accuses the Monday heroes of solving all their campaign woes by sipping tea and chatting with the baddies. This past Monday session was unusual for a number of reasons, first and foremost because the Monday players were less focused than usual and had "devolved" after a back-to-back weeks of not playing. Peter also imported a little of the Wednesday night group's uncouth barbarism to the Monday evening proceedings. He was the one who dropped the first poop joke of the evening, as I recall, and he also instigated the fight by attacking the beholders without provocation. That's not to say I'm blameless. When things started to get really silly, I could've told the players to can it. Instead, I added methane to the fire by referring to the lieutenant of an important NPC as his "number two." The truth is, when I'm feeling jovial, I drop things into the campaign that are deliberately intended to spark a laugh, such as the occasional mock-worthy NPC, laughable accent, and movie quote. But when I tire of the jokes and want to press forward with

the campaign, I suddenly turn very serious and ask pointed questions to deflate the ballooning silliness, such as "What do you do?" and "Is your character taking any actions this round?" That's the queue to settle down and gets the players back on track in a hurry. Good humor has its place and knows it place.

Lessons Learned

My sense of humor is very much in line with my players' senses of humor, and therefore I can get away with Lloyd the beholder in my game. Lloyd might not strike you as funny or the type of thing your players will find amusing. A good DM plays to his or her audience and gives players queues to help them grasp the intended mood of the game session. If you're running an intense session, you don't want it to become a farce by having the villain or monster break wind. However, I'll just come out and say it: No campaign is too good or too highbrow for a little potty humor now and then. And by "potty humor," I mean the general silliness that transpires when a bunch of adults sit around a table and act like 11-year-olds, pretending to be cooler and hipper than they really are (or ever will be). As a DM, I invest a lot of time thinking about my campaign and finding ways to keep the game moving forward. Sometimes I forget that my players don't need multilayered plots and deep, immersive role-playing opportunities to be entertained. Sometimes they need Lloyd the beholder, and they'll remember him fondly too!

I'm reminded of the television series *Angel*, starring David Boreanaz as "the vampire with a soul." The dark and brooding protagonist gave the show a grim intensity, and yet Angel had all sorts of little comic flourishes to remind viewers that they were being entertained, not tortured. I've been in campaigns that were pure torture because the DM scowled at every attempt to inject a little humor into the characters and the situations they faced. This week's encounter with Lloyd and his beholder buddies was like that final season episode where Angel is transformed into a vampire muppet. I remember thinking "THIS IS THE BEST EPISODE EVER!" while simultaneously acknowledging that it neither defines nor spoils the series as a whole. It works best as a one-off, and it drives home a couple key points:

- **You can punctuate a fairly serious campaign with humorous moments and interludes without ruining it.**
- **The DM sets the tone for the game session, and players who are "on their game" will usually follow the DM's lead.**

Until the next encounter!

Event Horizon

11/17/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The party's campaign against Starlord Evendor has reached a threshold. The time has come to forge alliances with powerful forces, from the Knights of Ardyn to the evil god of secrets, to put down the threat of the Far Realm. The players can sense the inevitability of the impending conflict, which will quite literally determine the fate of the world. The gravity is inescapable. Now comes the hard part.!

First off, if you're a player in my Monday night game, STOP READING NOW! This article contains plot spoilers for an upcoming episode of the Iomandra campaign and is for Dungeon Masters only.

The title of this week's article is particularly apt because the Monday night group has reached a "point of no return." We're halfway through epic tier, the end is nigh, and the heroes know what must be done. There are plenty of big fights headed their way, they basically know what they're up against, and the biggest mystery outstanding is who will survive to the campaign's glorious end.

The title is also a play-on-words. I'm not really talking about black holes or the gravitational pull of my campaign's plot but rather responding to a query by BalogTheFierce, who was curious about how I go about designing encounters. I'll endeavor to address the topic without regurgitating information you've seen in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and other sources

that tackle the topic at great length. Instead, I'll shed some light on a Very Important Episode of the campaign that's about to unfold.

First, let me dispel any illusions: I don't write complete, publishable adventures for my home campaign because I haven't the time and I rather like "running with scissors" and the improvisational challenge of working without a script. The adventures I tend to write (and I've written a lot of them over the years) are for the benefit of others and often focus on specific locations, such as a sprawling dungeon complex or an evil lich-king's fortress, and feature room-by-room explorations of these locations. Location-based adventures are great because they're easy for DMs to run (because each room or area contains its own encounter) and difficult to create on the fly (because of the amount of room detail and map work required). A DM can take a large, fully detailed adventure location such as the Temple of Elemental Evil and make that the foundation for an entire campaign, with the added benefit of not needing to spend a lot of time planning game sessions in advance. If the party ended the previous session in area 47, you can probably kick off the next session with the heroes entering area 48. No big deal.

But my campaigns tend to be more EVENT driven than ENCOUNTER driven, so the way I prepare for a game session requires a different approach. It's a bit weird that I think of my own campaign as a series of events and plot them out the way a TV series producer plans a show's seasonal arc, and yet I'm not a big fan of published event-based adventures written by other people. I think it's because an event-based adventure has a certain pace and sequence that doesn't suit every DM's style, whereas a location-based adventure is less about what-happens-when and more about what-happens-where, taking a lot of the DM's pacing and sequential concerns out of the picture.

The Episode Summary

A typical "episode" of my campaign is a series of events arranged in the order I expect them to unfold. It all starts with me remembering the events of previous sessions and fixating on something as the focus of the upcoming session. The focus might be a player character, an important NPC, a location, a big event, or some combination thereof. In next Monday's session, the focus is the secret island fortress of Ardynrise, which has been alluded to since the start of the campaign and which the PCs are finally going to visit for the first time. However, before the PCs reach Ardynrise and learn its secrets, I have some unfinished business from the previous session to tie up.

So, here's how an evening's worth of D&D comes together in Chris Perkins's home campaign:

Step 1: Word!

I open a Word document and type a short summary of important events from previous sessions, which I convert into a "Previously in Iomandra" paragraph to kick off the session. Doing this exercise puts me in the right frame of mind to look at the unfolding tapestry of my campaign, tie up loose ends, and pick up important threads.

Step 2: Dramatis Personae

Every game session is an opportunity for character development. Underneath the "Previously" section of my Word document I spell out the *dramatis personae*, or cast of characters (a "call sheet," if you will). Typing this list of PCs and NPCs gets me thinking about which heroes to shine the session spotlight on and how many different NPCs will likely come into play over the course of the evening. Sometimes the list of NPCs is quite short, but more often (particularly at higher levels) that's not the case.

Step 3: A Watched Plot

By the time I've finished Steps 1 and 2, I have a pretty good handle on where to take the campaign. In this case, I've decided to play up the Knights of Ardyn, a group of benevolent "terrorists" dedicated to stamping out corruption in the Dragovar Empire. They've been a behind-the-scenes force of good from the outset, and two of the characters have direct ties to them, yet we've never met Ardyn (the silver dragon leader of the group) or visited her secret island. That's about to change.

The characters know that the Myrthon Regency, a vassal state of the Dragovar Empire, has been taken over by mind flayers. They also just learned that the Knights of Ardyn recently helped the daughter of the Myrthon regent escape . . . and that she's been sequestered on Ardyn's island. It's not enough to send the heroes to Ardynrise; I also need something to HAPPEN there. I've decided that the mad Myrthon regent, Tsar Dakor, wants his daughter back and has an ally hidden in the party's midst. I also know that I have some other stuff to resolve en route to Ardynrise.

This step requires me to wrap my brain around the main "plot points" of the episode, which could (depending on what happens) take multiple game sessions to resolve. Basically, it's how I see the story unfolding in my mind barring the unexpected.

Step 4: Event-by-Event Breakdown

Once I've written down my prediction of how the plot will unfold, it occurs to me that there's about a 75% chance that the episode will take an unexpected detour, forcing me to rearrange events or jettison my ideas altogether. Nothing I can do about that; the PCs are epic level, after all, and anything can happen. Still, it helps me get a handle on the "scope" of the adventure by breaking the plot down into a sequence

of events, the order of which is less important than the ideas. After doing the event breakdown for this episode that I've decided to call "Ardynrise," I realize that it might take more than one session to resolve all the business I have planned, and that's okay. Before the heroes get to Ardynrise, they'll have some interesting scenes with Vecna's followers and perhaps another Far Realm mishap.

Not every event is a combat encounter, but it always adds something to the story or gives the story some forward momentum.

Step 5: Other Roleplaying Notes

Event-based adventures make it easy for me to think about the game session in terms of roleplaying opportunities for the players. Every event is a roleplaying opportunity waiting to unfold, even the ones planned as combat encounters. During Step 4, I'll sometimes think of ideas that don't really qualify as "events" but

are likely to come into play. I group these together under the heading "Other Roleplaying Notes" as a reminder to myself. For example, Stan! Brown plays a dragonborn agent of the Vost Miraj, the equivalent of MI6 in my world. The Vost Miraj leadership sees Ardyn as a threat to the Dragovar Empire's stability rather than a potential ally, so I'm expecting some friction between Stan!'s character and the Knights of Ardyn played by Michele and Nick. However, I'm not sure how that potential conflict will be resolved and can't really plan around it.

Here, then, is the complete episode summary, which conveniently fits neatly on one double-sided sheet of paper and easily into my campaign binder:

"Ardynrise"

PREVIOUSLY IN IOMANDRA . . .

Osterneth the Bronze Lich (Vecna's ex-wife) forged an alliance with the party against their common enemy: Starlord Evendor and the mind flayers in control of the Myrthon Regency, who are using the Dragon's Eye constellation to affect changes in reality. A flight of dragons bore the heroes safely to the island of Sha'hadam, where a derelict illithid nautilus had washed ashore. Aided by the Knights of Ardyn, the heroes commandeered the vessel, raised the ship's elder brain from the dead, and convinced it to do their bidding. Osterneth's changeling manservant, Metis (played by Peter Schaefer), discovered that he could pilot the nautilus by assuming the form of a mind flayer and sticking his tentacles into the ship's navigation station. The Knights of Ardyn wanted to use the ship to spy on illithid forces in Myrthon waters, and so the heroes persuaded the elder brain to cross a vast distance of ocean by taking the ship through the Far Realm. Metis's inability to navigate the plane led to a random encounter with three beholders. After surviving the encounter and returning to the natural world, the heroes appeared in the middle of a naval battle between Dragovar and Myrthon ships and quickly took the nautilus underwater. Using a sea snake figurine of wondrous power, Andraste (played by Michele Carter) and Kithvolar (played by Jeff Alvarez) rescued four survivors of a destroyed Dragovar warship and learned that they're deep inside enemy waters but not where they hoped to be.

HEROES (in alphabetical order)

Alex von Hyden (one-eyed male human wizard and Wyrmworn) played by Jeremy Crawford

Andraste (female eladrin warlord and party leader) played by Michele Carter

Baharoosh (male dragonborn rogue and Vost Miraj agent) played by Stan!

Bartho (dull-witted male human fighter) played by Matt Sernett

Kettenbar (male wilden shaman from an alternate reality) played by Shawn Blakeney

Kithvolar (male elf ranger) played by Jeff Alvarez

Metis (male changeling warlock and Osterneth's manservant) played by Peter Schaefer

Melech (male tiefling warlock and vessel of Ulban) played by Bruce R. Cordell

Theralyn (female elf ranger and dragon-riding Knight of Ardyn) played by Nick DiPetrillo

with special guest star

Xanthum Zail (male gnome bard from an alternate reality) played by Curt Gould

NONPLAYER CHARACTERS

Ardyn (female silver dragon and leader of the Knights of Ardyn)

Arando Corynnar (male human Knight of Ardyn captain and Andraste's confidante)

Thorn Rel (male tiefling Knight of Ardyn captain)

Lily von Marek (female human Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Kiril Szarke (male half-elf Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Taras (maimed male dragonborn Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Roksana Kral (female dwarf Knight of Ardyn, reporting to Thorn Rel)

Vastian von Hyden (male human Knight of Ardyn, Arando's friend, and Alex's cousin)

Tsarana Faijhan (female dragonborn noble and daughter of the mad Myrthon regent)

Ramiel (male demon-possessed elf with a dragon orb)

Nyrrska (male dragonborn ex-assassin turned acolyte of Bahamut)

Tauth-Xelramar (elder brain powering the illithid nautilus Soulmonger)

Alathar Balefrost (male half-elf lich working with Osterneth)

Kronze (skeletal red dragon "overlord")

with

Osterneth ("the Bronze Lich," Vecna's ex-wife, and the PCs' temporary ally)

and

Imazhia (female dragonborn priest of Bahamut)

EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Thorn Rel recommends that Andraste assume command of the illithid nautilus Soulmonger, which has been without a captain. The heroes and the Knights of Ardyn conduct a very successful reconnaissance of Myrthon waters before setting sail for Ardynrise. En route, Osterneth instructs Metis to guide the ship to prearranged coordinates where Vecna cultists are waiting to perform a ritual designed to make the heroes aware of past reality changes and protect them against future ones, but she also has ulterior motives. On Ardynrise, the silver dragon Ardyn gives Andraste a new assignment: helping Arando capture Tsar Dakor, the mad regent of the Myrthon Regency, using information gained from Tsarana Faijhan, who is staying at Ardynrise as the dragon's protected guest. Suddenly, Imazhia reveals that she's a Myrthon agent and opens a portal to the Far Realm, bringing forth an aberrant attack force to destroy Ardyn and recapture the Tsarana.

EVENTS

Event 1: "This Ship Needs a Captain"

Thorn Rel urges Andraste to take command of the illithid nautilus *Soulmonger* and keep Metis the changeling in line.

Event 2: "What's Wrong With This Picture?"

With Metis at the helm, the nautilus successfully reconnoiters Myrthon waters, gathering intelligence on enemy fleet movements and bases. The ship's elder brain seems very helpful in this endeavor and well disposed toward Imazhia, who raised it from the dead.

Event 3: "We Really Don't Belong Here"

If Metis is dead-set on cutting down travel time by taking the nautilus through the Far Realm, another failed series of Dungeoneering checks might lead the vessel into a part of the mad plane ruled by Mak Thuum Ngatha. Giant tentacles ensnare the ship, and a gibbering orb emissary of Mak Thuum Ngatha boards the vessel to negotiate the crew's surrender or a more suitable offering to the Nine-Tongued Worm.

Event 4: "By Your Command, My Lady"

Back in Iomandra, Osterneth informs Metis that Alathar Balefrost and his operatives have perfected a way to shield the nautilus against changes to reality evoked by the Dragon's Eye constellation and orders him to guide the ship to the tiny island of Kronze, where Vecnite ritualists are waiting to board the ship and cast the ritual to protect the vessel from the reality-altering constellation.

Event 5: "It's All About Secrets"

The ship arrives at the prearranged coordinates—a craggy island inhabited by Kronze, a skeletal red dragon "overlord" under Alathar Balefrost's control. The Vecnites have an artificially constructed demiplane that overlaps the natural world at this point. While Vecnite ritualists emerge to cast their warding spell on the ship, Alathar Balefrost smuggles special operatives onto the ship for the trip to Ardynrise, but strangely enough, Melech (with his otherworldly connection to the starspawn Ulban and the ship's elder brain) can sense them. En route, the Vecnites try to deprive the heroes and Knights of Ardyn of their memories so that they alone are privy to the intelligence gathered in Myrthon waters (knowledge is power, after all).

Event 6: "Many Dragons Died Here"

Thorn Rel guides the nautilus toward a mist-shrouded, star-shaped island littered with crumbled statues of dragons. Phantom dragons descend from the sky to fetch the heroes and bear them safely to Ardyn's fortress atop the spire that rises from the middle of the island. The story of the island is that a powerful dragonslaying wizard once resided here, and that many dragons united to slay him, only to fall prey to a powerful petrifying ward. They were turned to stone and became testaments to the wizard's power. Eventually, one dragon hit upon the idea of hiring adventurers to eliminate the wizard, and her plan succeeded. Ardyn was that dragon. The heroes are reunited with Arando Corynnar and meet Faijhan, the daughter of the Myrthon regent. She fled her homeland to escape the madness that has

engulfed it. Ardyn asks Andraste to join Arando on a "rescue mission" to capture Faijhan's family, including the regent, and thus destabilize the Myrthon government.

Event 7: "So Fall the Knights of Ardyn"

Having allowed the heroes to lead her straight into Ardyn's lair, the priest Imazhia reveals that she's a Myrthon agent and a "living gate" to the Far Realm. She summons forth a large force of Myrthon soldiers as well as an old "friend" of the heroes—Ramiel, the demon-possessed elf. He uses the *dragon orb* (given to him by the PCs) to subjugate Ardyn and turn her against the knights and the heroes. Alex's cousin, the "red shirt" Vastian, tries to stop Ramiel and might be killed off. Left to his own devices, Nyrrska assassinates Imazhia to close the living gate. Whoever kills Imazhia becomes deranged (as per permanent *confusion*), and although a Remove Affliction ritual rids the affliction, the individual remains ever haunted by glimpses of the Far Realm.

Event X: "They Call Me Xanthum Zail"

Depending on how events unfold, the starspawn "godling" Allabar might use the Dragon's Eye constellation to trigger another reality change, inadvertently bringing Xanthum Zail from the Wednesday night campaign into the Monday night game. Xanthum displaces Andraste as party leader, but who knows what'll happen when he actually shows up and tries to takes charge. Wackiness, one assumes. Having been a puppet of Allabar himself, Xanthum senses that there's a piece of the starspawn godling lodged deep in Kithvolar's mind—a result of the change in reality.

OTHER ROLEPLAYING NOTES

The Vost Miraj: Will Andraste, Theralyn, and the Knights of Ardyn allow Baharoosh—a known Vost Miraj agent—anywhere near Ardynrise? Stan! will need to be on his game if he wants to keep from being sidelined in Events 6 and 7. If he's forced to remain aboard the illithid nautilus, the ship's elder brain can keep him company . . . and turn on him once Imazhia tips her hand.

The Von Hyden Drama: Vastian von Hyden (Alex's NPC cousin) is introduced here for the first time. Vastian's a likeable NPC who can provide Alex with news about his beleaguered family and is also someone to throw in harm's way (a "red shirt").

If you've followed this column from the beginning, you've seen this sort of episode summary before. My episode summaries are very modular, and each element is short and surprisingly easy to write. And you know what? They become even easier to produce with practice, and they collectively form the "bible" for my campaign.

Preparing for Combat Encounters

Once I have an episode summary on paper and in my head, preparing for the actual combat encounters is relatively easy. There are three things I need to think about:

- **Miniatures for key monsters and NPCs**
- **Stat blocks for unique monsters and PCs**
- **Tactical maps for key encounter locations**

I have a large selection of miniatures and, given time, can find something appropriate for any monster or NPC in my campaign. I keep a selection of "stock NPC" minis of different races in containers that I take with me to the gaming table, and I pull monster minis from a giant coffin-sized plastic bin I keep under my desk. (It's the worst organizational system in the history of miniatures collecting. Sorting my minis is one of those rainy day activities I never get around to doing, which is inexcusable since I live in Seattle, which gets more than its fair share of rainy days.)

I've already discussed my secrets for creating instant stat blocks, so I won't repeat myself here. When it comes to maps, I try to reuse existing materials where practical; for example, I keep an array of "stock" tactical maps for shipboard battles. (It's no accident that a lot of the action in my campaign takes place on the decks of ships!) Most of my creative efforts go into mapping unique and important set pieces. For Ardyn's fortress, I have two options: I can design something new or steal a fortress map from some previously published source, in the manner I've previously discussed. Fortunately, since Ardyn prefers to assume humanoid form and her home was once the lair of a wizard, I don't have to create something humungous befitting a dragon of her stature.

Given the choice between reusing an existing map or creating a new one, I prefer the latter endeavor because the act of sitting down to draw the map forces me to imagine what goes on inside the location I'm creating. It gets me in the mood to dream about how Ardyn furnishes her lair and what surprises might be in store for heroes who take time to explore it. It also inspires me to think of interesting encounter set-ups and terrain. Some DMs are content with a roughly drawn map or doodle, but if I can't spend a generous amount of time creating something new, I'd rather just pillage something. When it comes to maps, I rarely see the event horizon before I'm completely

sucked in. I could spend an entire weekend designing Ardyn's fortress, from the time I settle on the architectural layout to the time I finish putting pen to graph paper. Talk about getting sucked into a black hole.

Next week I'll let some of my esteemed players chime in and mention a few things they've learned about Dungeon Mastering from the weekly abuse inflicted upon them by yours truly.

Until the next encounter!

Behind Every Good DM, Part 1

11/24/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Mat Smith's character, Garrot, is trapped in the Far Realm. His only means of escape is to fire himself from a giant catapult, which sounds dumb until you realize he's trapped in a part of the Far Realm that has molded itself around his own memories and beliefs—and Garrot's not particularly bright. Unfortunately, the catapult is guarded by a wizard wearing a pointy hat and surrounded by a force field that cannot be breached, only circumvented by digging under it with an apparatus of Kwalish. *Fortunately, Garrot is not by himself—the Far Realm has conjured minion versions of all his adventuring companions, past and present. Will they help Garrot escape, or won't they? That's for the other players to decide, once they realize they're playing alternate, glass-jawed versions of their characters. Wackiness ensues, but the adventure has serious undertones, for Garrot's fate (and his future in the campaign) rests squarely in their hands. In the hands of less capable players, I shudder to think what could happen.*

Week after week, I try to demonstrate by way of example that the role of the Dungeon Master really isn't that demanding—not if you can think on your feet and have a few good players on your side. A couple weeks ago, I was listening to the commentary tracks for Season 3 of *Leverage* when John Rogers, one of the show's executive producers (and co-author of the 4th Edition *Manual of the Planes*), joked that directing isn't rocket science, and I realized that DMing isn't either. There's an art to it, however; and like artists, no two DMs are alike. What serves me well as a DM doesn't necessarily serve you well as a DM. We paint our campaign canvases with different colors using different brushes, as it were. Doesn't mean your campaign is inherently better than mine, or vice versa. However, I think it's safe to say that neither of our campaigns would be much fun if our players sucked rocks.

If you ask film and TV show directors what they prize above all else, nine times out of ten they'll say "a great cast." If you have great actors, you can turn humdrum material into something enjoyable and excellent material into something spectacular. Similarly, if a DM has great players, his or her job becomes a LOT easier.

I have two regular groups of players – sixteen players total. Some of them are hardcore roleplayers, a few are hardcore min-maxers, and all of them heed the unspoken social contract that says, in a nutshell, "Thou shalt not be a jerk." Because it's the week of Thanksgiving and I'm heading out on vacation, I decided to ask my players to carry the bulk of this article. Frankly, I think they know more about my strengths and weaknesses as a Dungeon Master than I do, for they've been watching me DM for several years now. Not surprisingly, they have insightful things to say about the art of DMing.

Recently I asked my players to respond via email to the following question:

Based on your experience as a player in my campaign, what's one helpful bit of advice or lesson you'd like to share with the DMs of the world who are reading this article?

Here's what some of the players from my Wednesday night game wrote:

Chris Champagne

Characters: Kael (deva cleric), Kosh (tiefling warlock)

Often, a DM may have an idea of a chain of events they predict a party to go through. Perhaps even in a certain order. However, players get their own ideas. The word I use for what Chris seems to do is "back threading." If there is some super crucial resource, some super critical NPC the party needs to interact with, even if the party kills that NPC, Chris will haunt them with the ghost if necessary. The crucial bits come through no matter what, and the campaign evolves and moves forward. And one other tidbit: Chris never forgets that each player (and thus each character) wants to feel like a star at times, the center of the action, the intrigue and attention. He never forgets to shine the spotlight on them (whether the player is ready or not). In a Perkins campaign, everyone gets to be a star.

Andrew Finch

Characters: Abraxas (dragonborn warlord), Alagon (revenant ranger), Ravok (goliath battlemind)

The most important lesson that I learned about being a DM was "don't say No." I realized after seeing Chris apply this principle that it is similar to the rules of improvisation theater. Roleplaying and improv have a lot in common. As the DM, you should simply accept what your players want to do and then put your own twist on it. Just because you say "Yes" does not mean that you give the players what they want; in fact, it is fact better if you say yes but then give them something they don't expect.

I remember the time when the party had killed a mind flayer. A crystal shard grew out of its head and started to fly away. My character recognized that it was a memory crystal and that it was most likely taking the mind flayer's memories back to the illithid collective mind. He told the party to smash it, and as they did that, I asked if my character could use Read Thoughts to get anything out of the memories as the crystal was shattered. Chris said, "Sure . . . make a saving throw." It was brilliant. It gave me what I had asked for and at the same time filled me with anticipation of what was to come next. As my character took in all the memories of the slain mind flayer, he had to spend the rest of the campaign struggling to keep that mind flayer's personality under control. It gave the party a bunch of information about what was going on in the campaign but also gave my character a very interesting subplot.

Rodney Thompson

Characters: Vargas (eladrin avenger), Nevin (halfling rogue)

Be careful when you blow up the ship. What I mean by that is that the most controversial moment in the campaign, at least from the players' experience so far, was when Xanthum (played by Curt Gould) blew up the party's ship. That was the moment that I think that we felt the most powerless and blindsided and the moment that brought us closest to rebelling as a group. It was very much a rust monster moment—the moment when something we'd invested a bunch of money into was taken away.

Now, in the end things worked out (and for the better, storywise), but that only happened because of a couple factors: first because we've played together a while and trust that the DM's not being arbitrary for no reason, and second because most of us are seasoned players that enjoy exploring our characters' weaknesses as well as strengths. We're players who don't mind losing an eye, getting sucked into the Nine Hells, and so forth, because we know it's a chance to distinguish our characters. Losing the ship was a big blow, but for Chris Youngs it was an open door to becoming evil. For me, seeing the direction that Deimos was headed, it was a chance to explore what happens when Vargas is torn between loyalty to a childhood friend and being a good-aligned character traveling with an increasingly evil party. For Curt, it was

a chance to explore betrayal (even mind-controlled betrayal) and the ramifications of being the guy nobody trusts anymore. Yeah, that may be ascribing a lot of complex motivation to us as players, but I think it's a fair analysis.

Trevor Kidd

Character: Rhasgar (dragonborn paladin)

As a DM, Chris does quite a few noteworthy things, but the one that sticks with me the most is how much character he gives each NPC. Sometimes it seems like they're fleshed out like a main character in a story, but other times, he manages to create a memorable character with just a few words and actions.

An example that sticks with me from shortly after joining the campaign is Captain Prak, a member of the Dragovar empire's martial caste. Apparently he had blackmailed the party before my character, Rhasgar, had joined a few sessions earlier. We ran into him again (the first time for me) after colliding with members of a thieves' guild called the Horned Alliance. The party was later tasked with assaulting the Horned Alliance's stronghold to sweep away the last remnants of the gang. Upon our arrival, we found Captain Prak leading the forces that had "contained" the remaining members of the guild. Prak started insulting and talking down to the party, not believing such a worthless group of casteless non-dragonborn could have been sent by the magistrate to deal with the problem. It was just a few condescending lines of dialog, some sneers, and some sideways insults, and Rhasgar had as much animosity for him as any true villain they had faced already. After successfully completing the mission, we were all satisfied to see Captain Prak's dumbfounded look. When the magistrate asked us what we wanted as a reward, Chris Youngs and I both said simultaneously, "Fire Prak!" Our request was granted instantly, and our victory was complete.

It doesn't take much to flesh out a supporting character, and not all bad guys are villains. Sometimes they're just jerks, and taking them down a peg can be just as satisfying as saving a town.

Greg Bilsland

Characters: Amnon (tiefling rogue), Brell (genasi ranger), Ashe (deva invoker)

Don't fight purple dragons that can dominate you while on 100-foot cliff ledges? Don't attack young copper dragons at level 1 when you're alone? When you're below 0 hit points and stable, by the gods, stay down and don't get back up! All of these examples point a truth about Chris's game, and perhaps D&D games in general: The most memorable moments are often the deadliest and most harrowing. Don't pull punches just because you think you'll upset players. Sure, characters might die, but deadly and near-death experiences are quintessential parts of the game. Looking back on those experiences as a player, I don't feel the same grumpiness I might have felt at the time. In fact, now they're joked, and that's worth a lot more than if my character had simply beaten those encounters easily, got the XP, and moved on.

Lessons Learned

Want to know if you're doing a good job as a DM? Ask your players what they've learned about DMing by watching you work behind the screen. If they say "Nothing," you know you're in trouble!

Behind every good DM are good players. I've seen good DMs run games for bad players, at least until the paralysis sets in or until they're reduced to shambling wrecks. Bad players are DM kryptonite. That said, I recommend that every DM endure at least one horrendous player experience to remind him or her of the value of great players, of which I probably have more than my fair share.

Next week, in Part 2 of this article, you'll hear from some of the players in my Monday group.

Until the next encounter!

Behind Every Good DM, Part 2

12/1/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

Against the wishes of his adventuring companions, Peter Schaefer's changeling character, Metis (in mind flayer form), took the party's ship—a recently commandeered illithid nautilus—into the Far Realm for the second time. This enabled the ship to skirt vast distances of ocean in the natural world. However, his earlier attempt to navigate the Far Realm nearly ended in disaster, and no one expected this latest foray to go any better.

Knowing how unpredictable Peter can be at times, I had anticipated the possibility that Metis might take the ship back into the Far Realm and even planned an encounter should the ship become stranded there. However, I wasn't prepared for the success with which Metis piloted the ship or his intended destination. Peter had decided, on his own, that the time had come to take the fight to the campaign's main villain, Starlord Evendor, and attack Evendor's observatory deep in the heart of enemy waters.

Navigating the ship through the Far Realm was handled as a skill challenge. However, when I asked Peter where exactly he wanted the ship to appear in the natural world, his intentions became horrifically clear. He aimed to crash the ship into Starlord Evendor's observatory—and on this particular occasion, his aim was dead on. The ship materialized in the air above the observatory and plunged nose-down through the domed rooftop, embedding itself within the tower's metal superstructure. Everyone aboard the ship took massive amounts of damage, some more than others, and several friendly NPCs aboard the vessel perished instantly. The impact also set off every alarm in the tower.

Welcome to Part 2 of this article! If you haven't read Part 1, start there before pressing on.

Two weeks ago, I shared with you my outline for this particular "episode" of the campaign, which is nothing like what's described above. Suffice to say, Peter pretty much torpedoed my best-laid plans when his character abducted the campaign and took the party to an altogether unexpected place. I suddenly found myself flipping to the end of my campaign binder, where I'd placed my notes on Starlord Evendor's tower observatory and its occupants. I hadn't planned for the heroes to reach this encounter location until they were at least three levels higher, but when things like this happen, you just gotta roll with it.

I don't get scared when players take control of the campaign. There's a little bit of role reversal that happens because now I'm the one who's reacting to events, and I can't simply throw my hands into the air and shouting, "I didn't plan for this!" DMing is all about improvisation, and the show must go on. What do I do in situations like this? I use what I know and what I have, and I make up the rest. Although my plans for the session were jettisoned within the first twenty minutes, I found the experience exhilarating because the players were well and truly freaked out, and there was some wonderful inter-party conflict as a consequence of Metis's bold actions.

The point of this article, which I mentioned last week as well, is that you can learn a lot about DMing by listening to what your players have observed watching you "do your thing." Recently I sent an email to my players, asking them the following question:

Based on your experience as a player in my campaign, what's one helpful bit of advice or lesson you'd like to share with the DMs of the world who are reading this article?

Here's what some of the players from my Monday night game wrote:

Stan!

Character: Baharoosh (dragonborn rogue)

We always have choices as to where the adventurers will go next, and those are meaningful in that things will continue to develop while we're gone. If we choose to deal with Plot A first, when we come back, Plots B and C will have developed in our absence. It gives the world a feeling of great depth and makes every story arc choice feel more impactful. Sometime we can CREATE a big problem for ourselves just by letting a little one go unattended for a long while.

Bruce R. Cordell

Character: Melech (tiefling warlock)

Chris is a master of creating colorful and easily distinguishable NPCs. His tool for accomplishing this is manner (friendly, suspicious, forgetful, etc.), speed of speaking, and accent. The more you, as a DM, can emulate any of these traits to differentiate your NPCs, the more your players will appreciate

your game, because the creatures they meet while playing will seem to almost have in independent life of their own.

Matt Sernett

Character: Bartho (human fighter)

The plot is everywhere. You can't escape it. But it's not a monolithic freight train bearing you on whether you like it or not; it's a tangled web from which everyone dangles. I never feel railroaded; instead, we're often overwhelmed by options. Every NPC seems to have a story, so much so that I sometimes want to tell another player not to talk to an NPC. It's fantastic, and it's a way of running a game that I took to heart when designing the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*.

Nick DiPetrillo

Characters: Yuriel (genasi swordmage), Theralyn (elf ranger)

The most important lesson is a simple one: be open. Take a chance on a player from outside your usual circles. If someone wants to launch themselves out of a catapult toward the enemy ship, let him! When the story starts to spin off in a direction you never anticipated, set your notes aside and go along for the ride. If you can't find rules to support what a player wants to do, then you create rules. You should even be open to your own oddball ideas. Why not have a session where players take on the role of their characters' henchmen or have a flashback story arc that returns the group to their first-level selves? If you shut yourself off from the possibilities, you can still tell a great story, but legends are born when the whole group collaborates and pushes each other to go a little crazy.

Lessons Learned

In a heroic fantasy movie, the actions, dialogue, and fates of the heroes are scripted. Not so in a D&D campaign. Good D&D players don't pass up opportunities to take ownership of the campaign and make choices that affect its outcome, and I never get annoyed when that happens. Good D&D players also don't cry "Foul!" when things don't go their characters' way. I can deal with a lot of negative player behavior, but I can't stand whiners.

Yeah, okay, I sometimes feel guilty throwing high-level challenges at low-level characters when the players have no say in the matter (and there are valid reasons for doing so). However, when one or more players make a conscious decision to invite disaster, I have no qualms letting them stumble into harm's way and seeing the wreckage pile up. That's where all the best campaign stories come from!

In my campaign, it's absolutely possible for characters to hurl themselves at enemies of much higher level. I try to make levels in my game semi-transparent so that the players have a general sense of which foes are within their abilities to defeat, but I don't sweat when a character picks a fight with an enemy much stronger than him. I won't adjust the encounter difficulty to match the party level, either. Players are allowed to bite off more than their characters can chew. Great risk begets great reward . . . and a higher probability of getting killed. The same thing happens in *World of Warcraft* when you decide to take your level 70 character into a realm populated by level 80 monsters; sure, you might survive, but it's a scary, dangerous place to be.

In the case of the Monday night group, the adventurers (fortunately) have the element of surprise, but (unfortunately) they're facing multiple encounters' worth of enemies at once, all higher level than them. I look forward to seeing how they fare under the

circumstances and where the campaign goes should they prevail or perish.

Until the next encounter!

Riot Acts

12/8/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Chris Youngs plays a tiefling sorcerer named Deimos, but he is better known in the world of Iomandra as Sea King Impstinger, an up-and-coming merchant lord with a fleet of thirteen ships under his command. His hated rival, Sea King Senestrago, gets the heroes' attention by placing a catastrophic dragon egg aboard the Prince of Lies, one of Impstinger's ships. Unless the heroes agree to the terms spelled out by Senestrago's underling, an irksome tiefling captain named Eriesius Devilray, a ritual cast upon the egg will cause it to explode, sinking the Prince of Lies and killing its crew.

The heroes decide to teleport to the Prince of Lies via a network of magic teleportation circles that connect all the ships in the Impstinger fleet. Deimos plans to distract Captain Devilray and his retinue so that Vargas, Rodney Thompson's character, can attempt to dispel the magic cast on the enormous dragon egg. Using an invisibility spell, Vargas sneaks past the egg's guards and begins making Arcana checks. As he sprinkles magic dust on the egg to enhance his Arcana checks, he hears a faint sneeze and realizes there's a tiny, invisible creature perched atop the egg: Devilray's imp familiar! Vargas immediately casts time stop, preventing the imp from sounding the alarm and buying him time to successfully disarm the egg. When the time stop ends, the imp warns Devilray that the egg has been disabled, and all hell breaks loose.

Badly wounded, Devilray is forced to teleport back to his ship and immediately plots his escape. Deimos casts a Phantom Steed ritual, allowing the heroes to gallop across the ocean and board Devilray's ship before it gets too far. However, Devilray's crew is ready for them.

As the heroes subdue Devilray's crew, the ship's elemental rudder is activated, enabling the vessel to cross a vast distance by traveling briefly through the Elemental Chaos. When the ship reappears in the natural world, it's surrounded by six of Sea King Senestrago's warships waiting at a prearranged rendezvous point! Realizing they've fallen prey to Devilray's back-up trap, the heroes decide to stall for 10 minutes while Deimos creates a teleportation circle. Meanwhile, Vargas discovers that Devilray's ship is riddled with secret passages and finds Devilray himself hidden within them. A close-quarters fight leads to Devilray's capture, and Deimos gives Devilray a dire message to pass along to Sea King Senestrago before the heroes abandon the ship and make good their escape.

Yeah, I know, this adventure sounds a lot like a Star Trek *episode! Given that I run a nautical-themed campaign wherein approximately half of the action takes place on ships and the other half takes place on remote islands, it should come as no surprise that all five* Star Trek *television series serve as inspiration. But we're not here this week to talk about Trek. This week, I'd like to talk about the structure I use to build combat encounters that feel epic, regardless of whether the player characters are actually epic level.*

Before we begin, I think it's safe to say that 4th Edition has been around long enough that more and more DMs are gearing up to run epic-level adventures and campaigns. It's taken years for my weekly campaigns to reach the epic tier, but here we are at last! And so far, it's been a snap. *Shocked?* Having run tedious epic-level campaigns in the past, I know I am.

The epic tier makes a lot of DMs nervous. I suspect that's because the characters are much more powerful and have access to many more abilities, and consequently it can be hard to challenge them week after week. Nevertheless, in my campaigns there have been more character deaths in the epic tier than the previous two tiers combined, so I don't buy the argument that epic-level characters are indestructible (and neither do my players). The other challenge DMs face when running epic-level games is the simple fact that there are fewer epic-level monsters to choose from, which means a DM doesn't have as much pregenerated content to work with. I've gotten around this problem by repurposing stat blocks, as I've discussed previously.

When Rich Baker asked me to contribute some advice to his "Rule of Three" column concerning the obvious DMing challenge of "keeping up" with the game's power curve, I sent him an email that included the following advice for epic-tier encounters:

Don't show the players your entire hand at once. Let encounters unfold gradually, with new threats or challenges announcing themselves over a period of several rounds. I think of an encounter as a three-act play (or, if you prefer a different analogy, a three-stage rocket). I introduce a threat in Act 1, add reinforcements in Act 2, and then add a complication or twist in Act 3. Depending on how the heroes are faring, the "twist" might be to their advantage rather than to their detriment. For example, Act 1 might begin with the heroes defending their keep against an ancient red dragon. In Act 2, villainous rogues in league with the dragon announce themselves by attacking the keep from within. In Act 3, a gold dragon allied with the party shows up, chases off the wounded red dragon, and helps the heroes catch the fleeing rogues.

Not every encounter can or should have three acts, but it's a great format to follow for major combat encounters of ANY level because it keeps the players on their toes and varies the tension as the advantage shifts back and forth between the heroes and the villains. If you're familiar with literary three-act structures, you'll know that a lot of playwrights and screenwriters use them when crafting plays and writing scenes for much the same reason.

The events described at the beginning of this article follow this three-act format closely. Here's how the Wednesday night encounter breaks down:

Act 1: The initial threat is introduced. The heroes confront Captain Devilray and take strides to prevent the catastrophic dragon egg from exploding. When the egg is finally disabled, combat erupts.

Act 2: Reinforcements "arrive." Captain Devilray teleports away when first bloodied, and the heroes chase after his ship. They board his vessel and battle the crew. (In this case, Devilray's subordinates are the "reinforcements," even through the heroes come to them.)

Act 3: The twist. The heroes find themselves surrounded by a clearly overwhelming force. Now they're the ones who must flee.

As expected, the heroes were too busy negotiating, arguing, looting, and running about to take short rests between the three acts, which added tension and forced the players to be mindful of their resources. That said, the encounter could have "gone south" had circumstances been different. As a thought exercise, let's consider how the encounter might have changed had the following occurred:

Alternate Reality: Vargas fails to disarm the egg.

Perhaps Vargas fails his Arcana checks to remove the destructive spell cast on the egg, or maybe the evil imp detects him before he can finish his work. Either way, Captain Devilray and his retinue teleport away moments before the egg explodes and destroys the Prince of Lies. Each character gets to take one action before the explosion engulfs the ship, dealing 500 damage. Had this actually occurred, Acts 2 and 3 might have changed as follows:

Act 2: Reinforcements arrive. Captain Devilray's crew plucks the heroes' corpses out of the floating debris for delivery to Sea King Senestrago. Heroes who weren't killed in the blast might sneak aboard the ship and try to commandeer it.

Act 3: The twist. Captain Devilray intends to take his ship to the secret rendezvous point. The heroes must either convince him to betray Senestrago or find some other way to escape their predicament. If they fail, they are rescued and revived by one of Senestrago's rivals—another Sea King to whom the party is now indebted.

Lessons Learned

The example above illustrates the power of the three-act structure. Even if an encounter doesn't unfold exactly as planned, thinking of each major combat encounter in terms of three acts gives you room to ramp up the danger or diminish it. You no longer need to concern yourself with perfecting encounter balance because the three-act structure lets you make adjustments as the encounter unfolds. Epic level becomes no harder to manage than any other tier.

It's worth noting that not every three-act encounter needs to be structured exactly as I've described above. For example, I can envision a structure wherein Act 1 introduces a threat, Act 2 presents an unexpected twist, and Act 3 is when the reinforcements arrive. Here's an example: In Act 1, the heroes are leaving a tavern in Fallcrest when they are approached and threatened by a gang of rogues who seem intent on robbing them. Battle erupts until the start of Act 2, when a cutthroat suddenly recognizes one of the heroes as an old childhood friend. He instructs his fellow rogues to back off and apologizes profusely. He even offers to buy his PC friend a drink. Before things get too chummy, Act 3 begins when a rival gang of rogues jumps the wounded heroes and their newfound allies.

Once you've experimented with the three-act structure, you'll begin to see all kinds of variations and permutations that also work quite well, which are probably worth discovering on your own.

Until the next encounter!

My Campaign Has Issues

12/15/2011

MONDAY NIGHT.

The heroes are citizens of Arkhosia, a collection of more than two thousand islands spread over half the world. Centuries ago, a dragonborn empire sent its fleets across the Dragon Sea to conquer the human nation of Bael Nerath and the dwarven nation of Gar Morra. A bitter war also led to the destruction of the tiefling nation of Bael Turath. After these conquered islands were absorbed into the Dragovar Empire, dragonborn became the dominant race. Humans, dwarves, tieflings, and other "lesser" races became second-class citizens of the mighty empire, though sincere efforts were made to preserve their cultures and religions under Dragovar rule.

Fed up with years of oppression, terrorists from Bael Nerath launch a daring attack on the Dragovar capital. The heroes tried to stop it but failed, and the beleaguered empire was forced to send a fleet to make an example of the humans. General Rhutha, a dragonborn warrior who embodies the best and worst traits of the Dragovar Empire, believes that humans should be grateful for the mercy her people have shown them. She does not bow before terrorists or believe that humans have any rights beyond those given to them by the Emperor. She is ready to make war to ensure that Bael Nerath never gains its independence, for that turn of events would surely weaken the empire and reignite old conflicts. However, some of the heroes are human, and their noble actions of late have proven to General Rhutha that not all humans are fools. She's willing to hear them out, and they persuade her to meet with the leaders of Bael Nerath before crushing the rebellion beneath her jackboots. Still, the heroes don't know whether to trust General Rhutha. Is this warmonger capable of setting aside her deepest prejudices for the good of the empire, and is there any way to end the unrest? And how much do they really care?

The *Star Trek* franchise has more influence on my campaign than any other brand of entertainment. I steal from it shamelessly, right down to its episodic structure and its vast, never-ending mythology. One thing that has kept *Star Trek* relevant for generations, one of the reasons why it resonates with so many different people from so many different cultures, is that it tackles real-life issues. So does my campaign, and that's the way my players like it.

Not every *Trek* episode deals with important issues, however. Not every episode offers thought-provoking commentary on the horrors of war, race relations, politics and religion, life and death. Some of them are just dumb fun. As it happens, there are moments in our existence when we want to explore "the human condition" and other times when we want to sit back, set our brains on stun, and watch big stuff go boom. Silly, paradoxical creatures that we are, we find both superficiality and depth entertaining. *Star Trek* writers had the smarts to give us both, and I make a conscious effort to do the same as a DM.

A campaign can get by without delving into the sorts of "issues" that magnetize or galvanize our moral compasses and spark debates and wars on Earth. I've seen player characters lose themselves in vast dungeon complexes, killing monsters week after week, never once wrestling with the "why?" question as they plunge endlessly downward into deeper treasure-laden vaults. However, a campaign suddenly comes to life and feels more "real" when the heroes tackle issues from time to time. But there's a fine line to walk, which perhaps can best be expressed as a question: Is it possible to create an arena in which players can have fun wrestling with serious issues such as political corruption, slavery, noble sacrifice, prejudice, genocide, and ethical misconduct? I believe so.

D&D is first and foremost a game, and a game is supposed to entertain players, not make them feel like they're in school, in church, or at work.

That doesn't mean I, as a DM, can't put my players and their characters in situations where their morals, ethics, and perspectives might be tested or questioned on occasion. For example, how might the characters deal with a friendly dwarf wizard who keeps half-orc slaves? How would they interact with angry farmers hell-bent on burning innocent women at the stake because their crops are dying and they don't know why?

D&D is more than a game—it's a roleplaying game. Week in and week out, the players are trying to put themselves in the boots of their characters and make decisions that reflect their characters' chosen alignments and personality traits. Roleplaying is, by its nature, an outlet for exploring different facets of human and animal behavior. Roleplaying is, for most of us, a safe outlet to explore various issues we humans face in real life, but in a safe environment free of actual consequence. In a D&D game, I can kill and pillage to my heart's content and still be outraged

by an evil king who burns a church to the ground because its priests worshiped an unpopular god. Issues give players who like to roleplay something to sink their teeth into.

Lessons Learned

I can't assume that every Dungeon Master has a lot of experience running campaigns that tackle serious issues, but I'd be surprised to hear from a DM who ran a D&D game that didn't, at some point, confront players with a moral dilemma, ethical conundrum, or similar happenstance. One classic example: The heroes slaughter a tribe of evil, rampaging goblins and find a cave containing several harmless goblin children. Suddenly the characters are faced with an ethical conundrum: Do they kill the goblin children, or do they let the children survive? Some DMs avoid the issue by removing the children from the equation, if for no other reason that not all players enjoy wrestling with this kind of issue, and that's perfectly cool.

If you think your campaign needs issues, here's some general advice that has served me well over the years.

Try not to beat the players over the head with an issue. A player isn't going to get excited by a "very special adventure" about the evils of racial intolerance, or a world in which his dwarf character is bad-mouthed by every non-dwarf NPC week after week. Better to present an issue in light brush strokes, and leave it to the players to make a big deal out of it (or not). If the players would rather turn a blind eye than confront an issue, let them. Some issues will resonate; others won't.

Let the players make their own judgments. Most players I know don't want to be told how their characters should feel or how they should react to a given situation. They prefer to make those judgments on their own, based on their understanding of what motivates and provokes their characters. If the characters happen upon a wounded monster, leave it to them to decide whether it's better to slaughter or heal the creature. Imposing your own judgment on the situation doesn't make the decision any more engaging or challenging for the players.

Present issues fairly and responsibly. Ye gods, if you decide to present a controversial issue within the framework of your D&D campaign, be aware that an issue, by definition, can be seen from more than one point of view. If you intend to use religious fanatics as villains, for example, it would behoove you not to use them as tools to reflect your own personal misgivings about organized religion or to cast all religion in a negative light. Better to show more than one side of religious devotion by including a few devotees who aren't villainous and fanatical. Trust me when I say the party cleric will thank you.

Until the next encounter!

Player vs. Player

12/22/2011

WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

Several sessions ago, the heroes learned the true name of the Raven Queen, the god of fate. The details of how this occurred aren't important; what IS important is that the heroes have, over the course of the campaign, made enemies of Vecna and his followers. The god of secrets has been searching for clues to the Raven Queen's true name for ages, hoping this knowledge would enable him to usurp her portfolio and become the undisputed Lord of Death. Obviously, the Raven Queen doesn't want her secret to fall into Vecna's hand.

Rodney Thompson plays Vargas, a sworn servant of the Raven Queen. Recently, the Raven Queen contacted Vargas and declared that he was destined to become her eternal champion, but first he must keep her true name hidden from infidels who might use the knowledge against her. She tasked him with slaying everyone in possession of this knowledge, starting with his friends.

Last night, worshipers of the Raven Queen began to flock to Vargas's side, keen to help him complete whatever tasks the Raven Queen sets before him. Meanwhile, Vargas has been searching for a way to protect the Raven Queen's secret without turning on his fellow party members. The Vecnites are known to have rituals that can erase people's memories. Perhaps he can use such a ritual on his companions and erase the Raven Queen's true name from their minds, but that would mean confronting the servants of Vecna directly (a risky proposition, to say the least). So far, he's declined to share the details of his "mission" with the rest of the party. Will he find an end-around before the Raven Queen grows impatient, and is the party doomed to self-destruct?

What would drive a Dungeon Master, particularly an experienced one, to deliberately turn player characters against one another? Seems like an act of sheer madness. D&D is supposed to encourage player cooperation and teamwork, and frankly, players are quite capable of turning on one another without the DM's assistance. Why provoke inter-party discord and distrust?

Maybe I am chaotic evil. Maybe I'm just plain crazy for putting Rodney's character in the situation of choosing between his deity and his friends, but as a storyteller the predicament fascinates me on many levels. First and foremost, it's a conundrum that isn't solved by the simple casting of a spell, the spending of gold pieces, or the success of a skill check. Rodney isn't going to buy or talk his way out of this one! I also love the notion that the Raven Queen's command not only puts Vargas to the test but also puts Rodney's play skill to the test. How much information should he share with the other players? How ready and willing is he to put his character in jeopardy? Can he figure out some "out of the box" way to protect the Raven Queen's secret and still keep the party from imploding?

As a DM, I'm willing to risk party implosion for good drama. I'm enamored with the notion that good conflict doesn't always come from without; sometimes it comes from within. A lot of television series rely on internal conflict to fuel the drama. I'm thinking now of Lee "Apollo" Adama and Kara "Starbuck" Thrace from the reimagined *Battlestar Galactica* series. Here we have two heroic characters periodically at odds with one another as well as their commanding officers. In some cases, they make choices that fracture their "adventuring party," fueling much of the show's drama. Yet somehow, they always pull it together. In my campaign, I've adopted the mentality that whether the party survives or not is totally in the players' hands. My job is to keep the campaign alive until such time as the players' choices lead to a natural or sudden conclusion. As far as I can tell, my players enjoy getting together every Wednesday night to play their characters. They're not going to let themselves become the instruments of the campaign's demise, and so they fight me at every turn to keep the party from disintegrating. How far will my players go to keep the game alive? Pretty damn far. They enable me to indulge my inner demon's storytelling shenanigans.

Lessons Learned

The title of this article is a deliberate misnomer. Despite everything I've said up to this point, I'm not really talking about "player vs. player" conflict at all. It's a silly DM who turns players against one another. What I'm really talking about is "character vs. character," and an experienced DM who knows his players well can run a game in which the heroes occasionally find themselves at cross-purposes that could, under certain conditions, escalate into all-out conflict. It's been my experience that you need three things to pull it off:

- **Players who genuinely like each other and enjoy a roleplaying challenge.**
- **A little foreshadowing, so the players can steel themselves.**
- **Wiggle room, so that the players can consider their alternatives.**

My Wednesday night players are fond of inserting little "character vs. character" moments into the campaign that are usually played for laughs, so I felt pretty comfortable inciting a more serious inter-party conflict by testing Vargas's loyalty to the Raven

Queen. I'm lucky because my players all have thick skins and a sense of humor, and they rarely let a good roleplaying opportunity go to waste. There was a nice bit of foreshadowing when the characters discovered the Raven Queen's true name. The players knew that this discovery might come back to haunt them at some point, particularly given Vargas's link to the Raven Queen, and the conflict organically stemmed from this discovery. Finally, I could've had the Raven Queen tell Vargas to turn on his friends immediately, but that paints Rodney into a corner. Allowing Vargas time to wrestle with the decision gives Rodney time to think of ways to satisfy the Raven Queen's desires and save the party.

I have no qualms about creating situations in which characters are incited to turn against each other, but when it's over I still want my players to be friends, not enemies. I might be crazy, but I'm not looking to end my campaign with a fistfight at the game table.

Until the next encounter!

About the Author

Chris Perkins is the D&D Senior Producer at Wizards of the Coast LLC. He's to blame for everything. However, before you start hurling insults, know that he recently had his lower spine reinforced with shark cartilage. If you thought he was bad-ass before, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

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The Dungeon Master Experience Archive | 1/12/2012
Article Header Image
Real Complicated
The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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*This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my **Dungeons & Dragons** campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.*

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The heroes have arrived at Krakenholt, an island fortress where the feuding Sea Kings (the world's most powerful seafaring merchant lords) convene on rare occasion to discuss matters of great import. Summoning the Sea Kings to Krakenholt is no simple matter, so the party turns to a retired Sea King named Draeken Malios for help. This living legend, thought to have perished when his ship sank in the Battle of the Roiling Cauldron, climbs to the top of the fortress and rings thirteen chimes in a specific sequence, in essence "playing his song." The song echoes in the minds of Sea Kings around the world, who travel to Krakenholt with great haste.

Having rescued Malios from the Elemental Chaos, the heroes hope he can persuade his fellow Sea Kings to put aside their differences and unite against a common threat. The vaunted Sea Kings arrive one by one aboard their flagships over the course of many days. When the time finally comes to address them, the heroes are stunned to learn Malios has passed away in his sleep. Now, unexpectedly, they must confront the Sea Kings alone.

My early D&D campaigns (the ones I ran before I showed up on TSR's doorstep pining for work) were largely inspired by published adventures. My players had straightforward quests and could always tell who the bad guys were. The only major complications in terms of story were the monsters and traps that stood in their way, and the most important choice the players had to make was whether to turn left, turn right, press forward, or rest for the night. Killing the bad guy was not optional; it was expected. That's the D&D experience distilled to its very core, and for some players and DMs, that's about as much narrative complexity as they need and/or desire. The DM reveals the monster, the heroes kill it and take its stuff, and the campaign (such as it is) moves on. Back then, my players didn't need to worry about taking notes, because they were always riding toward the next town in peril and never had cause to look back.

My campaigns have become a lot more complicated over the years. All those years of playing the game, reading books, and watching TV and movies have motivated me to deliver complex narratives with multiple campaign arcs and myriad NPCs. While there are still plenty of monsters and villains to fight, the heroes' world is a lot less black and white. Sometimes the PCs don't know who the real enemy is, and sometimes their adversary isn't something they can kill (at least, not without severe consequences). My campaign worlds feel a lot more *real*, which can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on your point of view. For better or worse, the characters' actions and decisions impact the world around them and have real consequences, and every game session is an opportunity to add a host of new complications.

As a DM, there are two ways in which I add complications to my game: I "hard-code" them into the adventure from the very start (i.e., prearranged complications), or I insert them in response to certain character actions and decisions (i.e., unexpected complications). I find the former easier to create and the latter potentially more exciting—if for no other reason than they're often as surprising to ME as they are to my players! Allow me to cite a few examples from my Wednesday night game.

Prearranged Complications

When I'm planning a future encounter, I try to imagine in my head the likely outcome (all things being equal). One question I like to ask myself is: *If things happen as I expect them to, how could things get worse?* The goal isn't to make players feel miserable. Quite the contrary: my goal is to excite them by throwing a curve that takes the campaign somewhere they might not expect it to go.

Example #1: The heroes make enemies of a tiefling guild of assassins called the Horned Alliance.
Planned Complication: A tiefling character in the party discovers that his grandmother is the evil leader of the guild.

At some point in the middle of the paragon tier, as the conflict between the heroes and the Horned Alliance began to peak, it occurred to me that when the time finally came for the party to face the guild's leader, it would be cool to introduce a villain whom they might not want to kill—at least, not right away. It's hard to justify hurling *chaos bolts* at your grandmother while she's reminiscing fondly about your childhood, sharing big campaign secrets, and proposing to bury the hatchet. (Suffice to say, Evil Grandmother eventually got what was coming to her.)

Example #2: The heroes' quest to buy magical armaments for their ship leads them to an exiled dragonborn wizard hiding in the raft-city of Anchordown.
Planned Complication: The wizard-in-exile is suspected of selling weapons to enemies of the Dragovar Empire, so imperial spies have her workshop under surveillance.

The heroes might have their eyes on some new ballistas and catapults, but if they end up buying weapons from the wizard, they will quickly find themselves under investigation. With great Perception checks, they glimpse Dragovar spies lurking in the shadows, watching their every move.

Example #3: The heroes agree to help an old dragonborn paladin of Bahamut complete one final quest before he retires.
Planned Complication: The paladin's true mission could result in the heroes being branded traitors of the Dragovar Empire.

Here we have a well-meaning NPC who's clearly misguided. Brazius and his superiors believe that the Knights of Ardyn want to overthrow the government when, in fact, they seek to rid the empire of corruption. Unfortunately, Brazius believes the propaganda that brands the Knights as traitors, and although he claims to be an emissary sent by the Temple of Bahamut to treat with representatives of the order, Brazius intends to lure them into a trap and have them all arrested. When the heroes discover Brazius's true mission, they warn the Knights of Ardyn and aid their escape. The party's dragonborn paladin, Rhasgar (Trevor Kidd), owns up to the deed, at which point he and his companions are denounced as traitors of the empire, and Brazius returns to the Dragovar capital in disgrace. How's that for complicated? It took nearly half a year of actual game time, but the heroes finally got back on the empire's good side when they rescued the Emperor, at which point all was forgiven.

Unexpected Complications

The *unexpected complication* occurs when an opportunity suddenly arises to turn the party's situation from good to bad, or from bad to worse, or at the very least make them think twice about the direction they're headed or the decisions they've made.

Example #1: When the party's ship sinks to the bottom of the sea, one of the characters uses a ritual to summon an aspect of Dispater to help get the ship back.
Unexpected Complication: Dispater releases a powerful archmage from the Nine Hells, who raises the ship from the ocean's depths as a hell-wrought vessel with flaming sails. In exchange, Dispater requires that the character take a succubus concubine.

When the party's ship blew to smithereens, it never occurred to me that the ship's tiefling captain (played by Chris Youngs) would turn to the Nine Hells for help reversing this latest misfortune. My instinct was to reward Deimos for his cleverness by giving him everything he wanted and *more*. Yeah, okay, Deimos had to swear an oath to protect his succubus concubine from harm. Eventually, she was killed by her own hand, which broke the contract and got Deimos off the hook, but her actions aboard the ship spurred a lot of conflict within the group, leading several players to wonder whether the party was slowly becoming *evil*. She also complicated matters when she backstabbed an emissary of Vecna with whom the heroes had forged an unlikely alliance, throwing that alliance into peril.

Example #2: The heroes travel to the Elemental Chaos to retrieve a magical cutlass with the power to unite the feuding Sea Kings of Iomandra against a common threat.
Unexpected Complication: After the pirate warlord wielding the cutlass falls in battle, his henchman hurls the weapon overboard into a sea of acid.

When characters undertake a quest to retrieve a magical artifact, it's usually safe to assume that the adventure is built in a way that makes *success* the likely outcome. I prefer not to set any expectations, and I don't assume that every quest the characters gain is something they can complete. I think one of the qualities of a good DM is the ability to set aside personal expectations and let the player characters steer the narrative. It just so happened that when Vantajar, the one-eyed dragonborn pirate warlord, fell in battle, his lieutenant was next in the initiative count. Knowing the battle was lost and seeing the cutlass lying at his feet, he picked it up to keep any of the nearby player characters from doing the same. It didn't occur to me to toss the weapon overboard until that very moment, and I would never have predicted that event occurring. The reaction from the players was similar to what I'd expect had the lieutenant performed a *coup de grace* on a fallen PC . . . times a hundred. *Here endeth your quest, not with a bang but a fizzle*. How will the heroes unite the Sea Kings without the magical MacGuffin?

Suddenly, the campaign just got a lot more complicated and fun.

Example #3: A tiefling character with the Prince of Hell epic destiny dies.
Unexpected Complication: Asmodeus tells the dead character his work isn't done and returns him to the natural world as a pit fiend with orders to resurrect the dead tiefling empire of Bael Turath.

You can play a pit fiend in 4th Edition? Good heavens, yes, but it's probably the sort of option best left for epic tier, and it would be nice if the player somehow earned it. No, you won't find pit fiend character options in any product we've published to date. The idea to bring back Kosh (played by Chris Champagne) as a pit fiend wasn't something I planned. It only occurred to me after Kosh died, and then only because there's a strong infernal theme weaving and wending its way through the campaign. Most of Kosh's statistics didn't need to change, but I gave him an epic-level *fiery aura* power, an epic-level *tail sting* power, and a natural fly speed. But let's forget about the mechanics, shall we, and consider what having a pit fiend in the party actually means storywise. I've made all of the characters' lives more complicated. How will good-aligned NPCs react to the party? Will Kosh feel obliged to fulfill his new quest, and will the other characters aid him or not? And, finally, what happens when worshipers of Asmodeus start showing up on the party's doorstep looking for face time with the pit fiend?

Lessons Learned

For many players, mine included, the D&D game is an escape from the real world. It's a chance to be a total badass and do amazing things without having to worry about real-life consequences. But if you're like me, you want the campaign world to feel like a living, breathing place, and so there's a fine balance to be struck: To make the world feel real, you need the characters' decisions and actions to affect change, and as the world changes, new challenges arise. If the party wizard uses a *fireball* to kill a troll and several innocent villagers are killed in the fiery blast, as the DM it's my job to imagine the likely consequences of that event and find ways to stir the pot. Perhaps the wizard's actions will reach the ears of the king, who will demand that the wizard redeem himself, or perhaps one of those killed in the blast has a relative with powerful friends.

I can't tell you which complications will best serve your home campaign, since every campaign has its own characters with their own stories to tell. However, I can share with you some of my favorites:

Roll d20	Complication
1	The evil wizard whom the heroes are hired to kill turns out to be pregnant.
2	The artifact the heroes seek proves to be a myth or a clever forgery.
3	The heroes discover that one of their horses might actually be a polymorphed person.
4	A monster befriends the heroes instead of attacking them, then eats all of their rations.
5	A lich’s phylactery turns out to be something the heroes are reluctant to destroy.
6	One of the heroes’ childhood friends or relatives has fallen in with a bad crowd.
7	The heroes present evidence that the queen is corrupt, but the king refuses to believe it.
8	A character raised from the dead inherits a family curse or is haunted by a family ghost.
9	A brigand whom the heroes are sent to capture alive dies while in their custody.
10	An NPC claims ownership of a magic item seen in the heroes’ possession.

11	The heroes plunder a tomb and are cursed by the tomb's spirit to kill the one who hired them.
12	Someone the heroes trust is arrested on charges of conspiracy and treason.
13	The heroes must free vampire spawn from their evil master's control without killing them.
14	When heroes start asking too many questions, they are mistaken for enemy spies.
15	A group of adventurers or doppelgangers has taken to impersonating the heroes.
16	The enemy the heroes face is a creature that they have little hope of defeating in combat.
17	The heroes must acquire something from someone without being detected.
18	The heroes offend someone with connections to a powerful guild of rogues and assassins.
19	A hero must honor an ancient pact or blood oath sworn by his or her ancestors.
20	An intelligent magic item confronts the heroes with some unusual needs or demands.

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Previous Poll Results

Here's a preview of an upcoming column: As a DM, what do you normally do when one of your players is absent for a session?		
I contrive some story reason for the absent player's character to temporarily leave the party.	519	31.2%
The absent player's character 'fades away' until the player returns.	368	22.1%
I ask someone else to play the absent player's character.	276	16.6%
I play the absent player's character as a background NPC with little, if anything, to do.	149	8.9%
I play the absent player's character as an active NPC or quasi-PC.	130	7.8%
None of the above.	81	4.9%
I provide a simplified 'companion' version of the missing player's character (using the awesome Companion Characters rules in DMG2).	67	4.0%

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Slave To the Rules
The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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*This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my **Dungeons & Dragons** campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.*

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WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The players know that a secret society of Vecna worshipers has been spying on them from a hidden demiplane. They also know that the Vecnites have a garrison of warforged at their command. Fleet, the party's warforged warden, is unwilling to face his fellow constructs in battle, so the players hit upon the idea of using an illusion ritual to disguise their characters as warforged, slip past the garrison unchecked, and infiltrate the Vecnites' inner sanctum.

G reetings, fellow Dungeon Masters! My last two articles were a bit long-winded, so I'll endeavor to keep this one short and sweet.

It's been my experience that D&D players, by and large, tend to deal with in-game problems by hacking them to death with swords. When they come to a locked door guarded by a monster, they kill the monster and break down the door. How much I relish those occasions when a player decides to talk to the monster, fool it, or lure it away instead! To incentivize such behavior, I tend to reward players who take risks and solve problems without resorting to brute force. This approach can, over

time, inspire players to take greater risks, which often fuels the most memorable adventures.

Before my players hit upon the idea of using a Seeming ritual (*Eberron Player's Guide*, page 119) to disguise their characters as warforged, their only working plan besides charging forth with spells a-blazin' was to have Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis) confront his brethren and persuade them to embrace their individuality and throw off the yoke of oppression thrust upon them by their evil Vecnite masters. This plan was even more audacious than the "warforged disguise" plan. Had Nacime agreed to let Fleet deliver a speech before a wall of warforged adversaries, I would've done everything in my considerable power as DM to reward him in some fashion. Ultimately, the players abandoned this plan because Fleet's low Charisma made it unlikely that a Diplomacy check would succeed. Unbeknownst to them, I probably would've given Fleet a bonus on his skill check, and I probably would've given the party some advantage even if Nacime had rolled a 1. Worst-case scenario, the warforged aren't swayed by Fleet's speech, but maybe there's some small victory to be gained. What if a single warforged sees through Fleet's unlikeable manner and chooses to help the party in some innocuous or profound way? What if Fleet's speech prompts an exchange wherein the players discovers a schism among the warforged, prompting their characters to drive a wedge between the loyal guards and the disenfranchised ones? My goal is to find some way—any way—to make the players glad they decided to put Fleet in the line of fire. As the DM, I can choose to be a rules monkey or a storytelling juggernaut.

I'm reminded of a previous session during which the Wednesday night heroes summoned the Sea Kings (oceanic merchant lords) to a "summit meeting" and urged them to unite against a common threat. By then, the party had already gone to great lengths to forge this alliance, so by the time the Sea Kings arrived, I wanted to reward the players for their accomplishments by having the alliance come together as planned. (My players are always stunned when that happens.) After an hour of roleplaying, I asked each player to choose a skill that his character might have used in the course of the encounter, and then had each player make an appropriate skill check against a moderate DC. The results of these checks had nothing to do with the outcome of the summit meeting. Instead, I gave the players one secret for each successful check. In the end, the party had its alliance, and they also discovered some things they didn't know previously about the various Sea Kings in attendance.

Lessons Learned

I know many DMs like to forgo dice rolls in favor of pure roleplaying, but my personal preference is to let the dice play their part. This is D&D, after all, not a *Vampire* LARP. Having said that, I'll be the first to admit that I've never been a slave to the rules. I try to be fair and impartial, but when it comes right down to it, I'm more interested in creating a fun and engaging campaign than crafting the perfect skill challenge or making sure a character is using a skill exactly as written. If my players want to infiltrate an enemy stronghold disguised as warforged, the rules say I need to make an Insight check every time a creature views or interacts with them, to which I say "Screw that!" It might seem odd that a member of Wizards R&D would discard D&D rules on a whim, but to quote Captain Hector Barbossa: Sometimes the rules are more what you'd call "guidelines."

The rules will boss you around if you let them, but they exist to *serve* you and your campaign. Don't let them shackle your creativity or the creativity of your players. By the same token, the rules aren't your enemies. They're your allies, ready to win battles for you on command. Use them as you will.

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Previous Poll Results

Hey DMs: Would you consider giving an epic-level magic item or some other item of comparable value to a character of 10th level or lower?		
If it was important to the character or the campaign, yes.	896	53.1%
Maybe. Depends on the item.	501	29.7%
What kind of silly question is that? No, of course not.	225	13.3%
Absolutely. I love overpowered characters in my campaign!	45	2.7%
Sure, if the player buys me pizza three weeks in a row.	21	1.2%
Total	**1688**	**100.0%**

The Dungeon Master Experience: Poll #48

Not an issue: someone at the table always has the answer.
I make it up—my game, my rules.
I make it up just to keep things moving, then look up the actual rule later.
I ask one of my players to look it up, then I apply it as warranted.
I look it up personally, then apply the rule as warranted.
My players and I agree to a rule we can all live with.
I defer to one or more of my players. They know the rules better than I do.
None of the above.

Christopher Perkins
Christopher Perkins joined Wizards of the Coast in 1997 as the editor of *Dungeon* magazine. Today, he's the senior producer for the **Dungeons & Dragons** Roleplaying Game and leads the team of designers, developers, and editors who produce D&D RPG products. On Monday and Wednesday nights, he runs a D&D campaign for two different groups of players set in his homegrown world of Iomandra.

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The Dungeon Master Experience Archive | 1/26/2012
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Unfinished Business
The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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*This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my **Dungeons & Dragons** campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.*

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

MONDAY NIGHT. The epic-level adventurers have some unfinished business in the city of Io'calioth. A tiefling crime lord named Dorethau Vadu, whom the party hasn't encountered since paragon tier, remains at large, and the players have decided her time has finally come.

Behind the grandmotherly façade is a woman who despises the Dragovar Empire so completely that she kidnaps dragonborn babies and eats them for breakfast. With her guild in shambles, Vadu has turned to an unlikely ally for protection and sequestered herself in his fortified manor. This ally is someone the heroes have yet to meet: Colonel Arzan, a corrupt Dragovar official whom Dorethau Vadu is blackmailing. It seems Colonel Arzan plotted with several others to overthrow the Emperor, and though he was never caught, Vadu obtained evidence of his treachery and is blackmailing him for protection. That's not to say Arzan is deserving of the party's sympathy, for as the players will soon discover, he parades around with orphans on leashes and wears a cloak made from the stitched faces of his enemies.

I magine you're a Dungeon Master who's just put the finishing touches on a new adventure that promises to entertain your players for several game sessions. Suddenly, out of the blue, something unexpected happens. The campaign turns left instead of right; the players decide to go *this way* instead of *that way*, and you decide to follow them to see what happens next. In short, your best-laid adventure is over before it begins. Has this ever happened to you? I ask because it happens to me *all the time*.

I like to dangle all sorts of adventure hooks in front of my players. That way, they never feel like the campaign has only one road to follow. I like my campaign to have lots of roads, lots of trails, lots of meandering footpaths, and even a few dead ends. When my crafty players see an adventure hook dangling in front of them, sometimes they bite, and sometimes they swim away. Even if they swim away, I leave that hook dangling, just in case they come back.

I expected Dorethau Vadu to be dead by now—another evil bag of XP on the party's road to glory. The heroes had all but wiped out her organization, and I had planned an elaborate final showdown with the horned crone. Then the adventurers got distracted by some other shiny adventure hooks, and off they went. Oh, sure, the players occasionally reminded themselves of the need to rid the world of so evil a creature as her, but as they gained levels and crossed over into epic tier, it seemed increasingly unlikely that the party would trouble themselves with eradicating the tiefling crime lord. And so, presumably, she kept on eating dragonborn babies.

In every group of players, there's at least one who keeps a list. You know what I'm talkin' about. In my Monday night group, that player is Peter Schaefer, and somewhere near the top of Peter's list is the name "Dorethau Vadu." So here we are, almost a year later. Through a series of adventurers and misadventures, the party is back in Io'calioth, and Peter's decided the time's come to strike that name off the party's list. Through his growing network of spies, Peter's character (Oleander the halfling rogue) has discovered where Dorethau Vadu is hiding, learned the layout of Colonel Arzan's fortified manor, and even bribed one of his unfaithful household servants. (Ah, the joys of being epic level!) The party is planning to invade the manor and rid the campaign of Dorethau Vadu, and probably Colonel Arzan, too.

I should be pleased, yes? The players have finally deigned to complete my little adventure. Unfortunately, the adventure was designed for paragon-tier characters, not epic-level ones! What's a DM to do?

Lessons Learned

Scaling up an adventure is easy. If you've been keeping up on this column, you already know my tricks for advancing monsters and NPCs; however, in this case, I decided not to use any of them. I decided to keep Dorethau Vadu at her current level and instead make her environment and her allies more threatening. My reason is simple: In terms of pure logic, there's no in-world way I can think of to explain how Vadu's power increased so dramatically, particularly after the heroes laid waste to her organization. But more importantly, the threat she poses doesn't derive from her statistics, but from her influence. If the PCs can get to her, they'll have no trouble killing her. The trick is getting to her.

I'm doing something similar but different with Colonel Arzan. Like Vadu, he's well below the party's experience level in terms of raw statistics. However, he's a member of the imperial martial caste, and if the party simply kills him, they'll be branded traitors of the empire, which carries with it consequences more than commensurate with their level. The trick here is to find proof that Arzan himself is a traitor, and ironically enough, to do that the heroes need Dorethau Vadu.

By the time players get around to knocking off a threat that's been on their hit list for nearly ten levels, one needs to give serious thought to how challenging the encounter needs to be. A "cakewalk" can be a lot of fun for players because it reinforces just how powerful their characters have become in the

world. Still, it's always fun to confront players with the consequences of leaving behind unfinished business. When the PCs decided not to finish her off, Vadu crawled under a rock and stayed out of their hair just long enough to become dangerous again. The tiefling crime lord hasn't been idle all these many months. Oh my goodness, no! Like any evil tiefling grandmother, she's been knitting a tapestry depicting a scene from the Nine Hells. She's also paid ritualists to enchant the tapestry, transforming it into a portal through which she can summon powerful devils to do her bidding. It's hanging on the wall of her bedroom in Colonel Arzan's estate. I don't know where I got the idea, but as far as I'm concerned it's brilliant because all that's left for me to do is surf the online D&D Compendium and figure out which devils I want to use!

So, to summarize:

- **Don't get frustrated if the players turn away from your adventure. If you can afford to, let 'em. Maybe they'll find it more alluring later on.**
- **When the players finally come around, only "scale up" the parts of the adventure you have to. Trust your left brain to determine what needs to change, trust your right brain to come up with simple yet creative ways to challenge the heroes, and let the rest be a cakewalk.**

Next week marks a major benchmark for *The Dungeon Master Experience*. It will be the 50th article in this series, wherein I will tell you about my *next* campaign and how it's already affecting the current one.

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Previous Poll Results

What's your default reaction when you can't remember a specific rule during a game session?		
I make it up just to keep things moving, then look up the actual rule later.	1243	46.2%
I look it up personally, then apply the rule as warranted.	362	13.5%
I ask one of my players to look it up, then I apply it as warranted.	320	11.9%
My players and I agree to a rule we can all live with.	292	10.9%
Not an issue: someone at the table always has the answer.	244	9.1%
I make it up—my game, my rules.	140	5.2%
I defer to one or more of my players. They know the rules better than I do.	51	1.9%
None of the above.	36	1.3%
Total	**2688**	**100.0%**

The Dungeon Master Experience: Poll #49A

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The Dungeon Master Experience Archive | 2/2/2012
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Shiny New Thing
The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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*This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my **Dungeons & Dragons** campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.*

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. Anyone who sails the Dragon Sea eventually comes to a towering wall of necrotic fog known as the Black Curtain, and hidden beyond this barrier is the magocracy of Vhalt, a lost kingdom erased from historical scrolls and watched over by the god-lich Vecna. Backed by their dark deity, the rulers of Vhalt have begun to plot the downfall of the Dragovar Empire, which nearly destroyed their kingdom long ago, all the while keeping themselves hidden.

For the past ten levels of the campaign, the player characters have learned more and more about the secret threat that lurks beyond the Black Curtain, but only recently did they discover the full extent of Vhalt's plans. With the last great mystery of the campaign finally revealed, the stage is set for what I hope will be an epic endgame that will determine the fate of Iomandra and the adventurers. Will the campaign actually end this way? Only time will tell. . . .

N ot every campaign comes to a satisfying end. When it *does* happen, it's a rare thrill—a testament to the dedication and effort of everyone involved. I commend any DM who can keep a gaming group

(including himself or herself) entertained long enough to see a campaign through to its natural conclusion.

I don't need to tell you why campaigns die before their time; if you're reading this article, you already know the reasons. Life gets in the way. The group breaks up. The players become bored. The power creep gets out of hand. The campaign loses its spark. TPK. The DM runs out of steam. I've experienced all of these things in my thirty-odd years playing and DMing the game. A D&D campaign is like a television series; statistically, the odds are high it'll get cancelled before its time.

The first ten years I spent playing D&D, I never completed a single campaign, either as a player or as a DM. My experience up to that point taught me that campaigns only ended when the characters died or when the next campaign began. This week, I'd like to briefly discuss one of the leading causes of campaign death and share with you two of the steps I've taken to keep my campaigns alive.

:thud:

Oops, another campaign has just died. It was jogging along Paragon Avenue toward Epic Boulevard when, suddenly, out of nowhere, the DM came upon an idea for something NEW! Yes, it's happened before, but on previous occasions the DM was able to get past the idea and keep his or her thoughts focused on the current campaign. Not this time, however. Maybe the campaign's lost some of its luster. Maybe it's completely out of control. Maybe it's just showing its age.

How does a DM keep the current campaign alive when the next great idea comes along?

Just when you thought you had a great thing going with your current campaign, a new and amazing idea steals your heart! Suddenly, you find yourself falling out of love with the *campaign du jour* and daydreaming about this wonderful new campaign that doesn't even exist except in your mind's eye. Or maybe your current campaign doesn't inspire you like it used to, and this new idea gives you a chance to do something you haven't done in a while: explore a new world.

A DM can't love two campaigns. Okay, maybe that's not true for *you*, but it's absolutely true for me. (You could argue that my Iomandra campaign is, in fact, two campaigns, but it isn't. It's one campaign being run for two different groups of players.) I know I'm not alone when it comes to issues of campaign commitment. Many DMs fall "out of love" with their current campaigns after falling in love with some newly imagined world of adventure. I hear about it all the time at panels and seminars. DMs are always asking me how I can keep a campaign alive for YEARS when they're ready to bail after 6 months! The truth is, when a wonderful new idea comes along, it's hard to keep the old fire burning.

Look me square in the computer screen and tell me that no new campaign idea, no matter how awesome and inspired, will *ever* come between you and your current campaign. As engines of creativity, DMs are always putting their minds toward the next creative endeavor. There's something to be said for starting fresh. But then, there's also something to be said for finishing what you started. After all, the most important part of any story is the ending. Can you imagine if Peter Jackson had shot only *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*, but not *The Return of the King*? No one likes two-thirds of a story.

Lessons Learned

As long as the DM is committed to keeping his or her players entertained, nothing but divine intervention and life's little surprises can slay a campaign before its time. However, when that commitment falters, when the romance begins to show its cracks, it's only a matter of time before the DM abandons the campaign and drags the players away with him (or her). Fortunately, I've found a

couple ways to keep that from happening, at least until the time comes to give the campaign its proper sendoff:

1. Get the new idea out of your head and "on paper."

I put "on paper" in quotation marks because almost nobody writes *on paper* anymore, but there's a reason why people like to keep diaries and journals: writing things down is a legitimate form of therapy. To me, transferring a creative idea to a Word file is like an exorcism. When I'm haunted by an idea and it's rattling around in my brain, sometimes trapping it inside a *document* is all that's needed to keep it from hoarding my affection.

The next time a new idea threatens your campaign, open up a Word file and pour your idea into it. Sometimes the idea will amount to a couple paragraphs, sometimes a couple pages. What's important is that the file becomes the vessel for this new idea instead of your brain, which isn't to say that it's erased from your mind. On the contrary—the idea's still there, but now you've *done* something with it. Having been shown a "night on the town," it's far less likely to nag you or tempt you with its seductive wiles.

My two most recent D&D campaigns (Arveniar 1999–2006, Iomandra 2007–Present) began as playtests of 3rd Edition and 4th Edition, respectively. Given that Wizards has announced that we're working on the next iteration of the RPG, it should come as no surprise that I've been giving serious thought to what happens after the current Iomandra campaign ends. While I haven't discussed it with my players (and they will certainly have their input), one idea has emerged as an early frontrunner. To keep it from getting in the way of my current campaign, however, I trapped the following paragraphs in a Word file:

VALOREIGN

Five years ago, the destruction of the Feywild caused a flood of arcane energy to wash over the island nation of Valoreign, transforming the realm and its many creatures. Ordinary folk became "deformed" or began manifesting otherworldly abilities, ordinary beasts were turned into monsters or imbued with sentience, and buildings were twisted into new shapes and in some cases gained personalities all their own. Even King Thomas is not his "old self" anymore. Five years ago, he was transformed from a senile 90-year-old husk of a man into a 19-year-old wizard in the prime of life, full of strange dreams and desires.

There's a new saying in Valoreign: Nothing is quite how it used to be.

Across the sea, foreign powers believe Valoreign is cursed, and some of them want nothing to do with the island realm. Others see Valoreign as a demesne of great magic to be conquered or destroyed. And then there's the Raven Queen, who understands quite well what the people of Valoreign are going through. Five years ago, she escaped the destruction of the Shadowfell by fleeing to the natural world and seizing hold of a mountain kingdom corrupted by the shadow plane. Surrounded by legions of dwarves, orcs, and giants possessed by the shadows that creep across her dark land, the Raven Queen has begun to stretch her talons outward. It's only a matter of time before her mad dreams and those of young King Thomas collide.

Valoreign, such as it is, is still more of a concept than a campaign setting, and it remains to be seen whether my infatuation with the idea will last and, more importantly, whether my players will be excited to explore this new setting. (If not, it's back to the drawing board!) However, the simple act of writing these paragraphs has helped me entertain and compartmentalize Valoreign as well as keep it from diminishing my enthusiasm for Iomandra.

2. Don't save the good stuff for the next campaign.

If you can work a new idea into your current campaign, DO IT. Don't save it for later. (You'll never run out of ideas, trust me!) It's easy to be seduced by a new idea when you're bored with the status quo, but sometimes a new idea is just the spark of excitement your listless campaign needs.

Allow me to illustrate my point by way of example:

A few months ago, the characters in my Wednesday night group hit 25th level, and it dawned on me that the players had basically solved all of the mysteries of the campaign. They knew who their enemies were and what needed to be done to save the world, as epic-level heroes are wont to do. Once all the mystery is gone, it's easy to become tired of the setting. So I decided to do a couple things I'd never done before: First, I acknowledged the heroes' greatness by making them powerfully influential and giving them followers and ways to exert control over the world around them. Second, I decided to sow some inter-party conflict, and I snatched the Raven Queen from my nonexistent "Valoreign" campaign to do it! You can read the sordid details here (http://wizards.com/dnd/Article.aspx?x=dnd/4dmxp/20111222). As a consequence, it's unlikely that the Raven Queen will be a central figure in my next campaign as originally planned (because I hate repeating myself), but that's perfectly fine. I've never been light on ideas, and I'm fairly certain I'll come up with something as good if not better to replace her.

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Previous Poll Results

A mad archmage teleports a bunch of adventurers to a tropical island infested with monsters. They are stranded and without rations and have no hope of escape. Who dies first?		
Gnome illusionist	525	26.0%
Half-elf bard	431	21.3%
Dragonborn paladin	262	13.0%
Drow assassin	224	11.1%
Half-orc barbarian	128	6.3%
Tiefling warlock	100	5.0%
Human warlord	86	4.3%
Halfling rogue	81	4.0%
Warforged artificer	78	3.9%
Dwarf cleric of Moradin	67	3.3%
Elf ranger	38	1.9%
Total	**2020**	**100.0%**

Who dies last?		
Warforged artificer	668	32.9%
Elf ranger	335	16.5%

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Map Fu

The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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MONDAY NIGHT. The heroes infiltrate the martial district of Io'calioth, capital city of the Dragovar Empire, and storm the fortified manor of Colonel Arzan, an evil dragonborn soldier who's secretly harboring a tiefling crime lord. They attack while the colonel is away, slaying the crime lord and snatching her corpse, but not before she summons a pair of pit fiends to defend her. Believing they have accomplished their mission, the party's main striker and defender decide not to face the devils and instead flee the scene by phasing through the walls, leaving the other party members to their own devices and allowing the pit fiends to gain the upper hand. The remaining characters find their means of egress cut off as the devils use their considerable might and intelligence to corner and crush them one by one.

T o prepare for the attack on Colonel Arzan's estate, the player characters procured blueprints of the fortified manor. Thus, it seemed like a good idea to render the three-level manor on a wet-erase battle map so that the players could get "the lay of the land" and plan their assault.

While dungeon tiles, printed poster maps, 3D terrain, and other kinds of prefabricated mapmaking tools are helpful on occasion, my preferred medium for displaying tactical maps is the wet-erase battle map. I find the blank, gridded canvas extremely versatile, allowing me to create encounter locations that aren't easily replicated by other means.

There are some drawbacks to wet-erase battle maps:

A. They take up considerable space on the game table. Since I run my games at work in a fairly spacious conference room with a large table, this isn't really a concern for me (although, it's worth noting, with eight or nine players around the table, that conference table isn't as big as I'd like it to be sometimes).

B. It takes time to draw a half-decent map on a wet-erase battle grid, particularly if you're like me and make mistakes and need to dab a damp towel on the map occasionally to correct a drawing error.

C. A quickly drawn or poorly rendered battle map can add very little to the play experience. You'd almost be better off drawing the map on your forehead without using a mirror!

There are dry-erase products similar to canvas battle maps, from laminated posters to oversized plastic jigsaw puzzle pieces that fit together to form a map board, and they provide not only excellent "creative canvases" but also have the added virtues of being easy to modify and erase. However, I like to draw my maps ahead of time rather than during the session, and I find maps drawn on these laminated or jigsaw surfaces smudge too easily for my tastes. When I lay out a map before my players, I want to conjure a specific reaction—not one of disappointment, but of awe. That's hard to pull off if the players are actually sitting around the table, watching you draw a straight line or, worse, a circle!

When it comes to wet-erase canvases, I've drawn enough tunnels, chambers, statues, staircases, alcoves, railings, fireplaces, and rubble over the years to become quite proficient in the medium, and I have a few tiny tricks that might be of interest to you. I find that it's the little flourishes that really help to make my maps stand out, and they don't take as much time as you might think.

Map Tricks

To help illustrate some of my teeny-weeny map tricks, I took snapshots of the battle maps currently rolled up on my DM cart. The locations shown here are *snippets* from several different maps created for several different adventures, and some of them are quite old. Some were drawn hastily in a matter of seconds, others in a matter of minutes. They are all "final" versions (i.e., not works in progress). When I draw a map prior to a game session, I quite often leave off details until the PCs actually explore the area, at which point I add furnishings and whatnot, and I sometimes make additions and alterations to a map when the features of a location change. What you're seeing here is how the maps ended up looking when all was said and done. Alas, I don't have versions of the maps as they appeared at the beginning of each session, so you'll have to take my word that what I'm saying is true.

Trick #1: Rubble comes in two sizes.

When I draw rubble, I first create rough circles to represent the big chunks, and then I fill in the gaps with some hasty "stippling" (dots). It looks more time-consuming than it is, but it gives the rubble *texture*.

Trick #2: Rubble is the easiest kind of terrain.

If you don't know how to fill a space, use rubble. It adds easy yet tactically interesting terrain to any encounter, and its presence is easily explained. When drawing the big chunks, try not to make any two exactly alike. It lends the map a great deal of verisimilitude, and it's easier done than said.

Trick #3: Cliffs fill squares, and they have forks.

When I draw cliffs, I let them fill up entire squares (because they are, in effect, terrain). The fewer squares "thick" they are, the steeper they appear. The great thing about cliffs is that they look best when the lines aren't straight. Every few cliff lines, I add a "fork" (like a fork of lightning) to help distinguish them from steps. The forks also give the cliffs a naturally chiseled look.

Trick #4: Minimal furnishings are ideal.

I don't waste time drawing all of the contents in a given area. Minimal furnishings provide clues about what's important. A bed in the middle of a room tells my players it's a bedchamber. A spiral staircase in a corner gives the players hints about where their characters can go. If they ask me what else these rooms contain, I tell them (and add detail as needed), but I like having lots of empty squares for monster minis!

Trick #5: I don't believe in using empty rectangles, and railings are just hollow walls.

This map illustrates a couple tricks: (1) I never use empty rectangles to represent items within a room. They provide no information could be anything, which is why I don't use them. Want to turn a nondescript rectangle into a table? Just fill it with wobbly lines to represent the wood grain. (2) When I treat railings as "hollow walls," my players never have trouble figuring out what they are.

Trick #6: Build battlements starting with the corners.

Here's a map of a rooftop battlement. First I draw the inside line that defines the overall shape of the roof. After that, the battlement is built thus: (1) Always draw the "corner blocks" first. (2) Then draw a block over each gridline so that it straddles two squares. (3) Add a block between each of the ones you've already drawn. (4) Connect the blocks with a thinner double line to complete the battlement.

Trick #7: Cross-hatching is great for filling in "dead space."

Nothing is better than cross-hatching for filling dead space and defining the edge of a wall, and hastily drawn cross-hatching is better than none. It adds a couple minutes of extra time to the mapmaking process, but the results speak for themselves.

Of course, these map tricks can apply to pretty much any hand-drawn map, regardless of the surface

upon which it's drawn. Hopefully DMs of all experience levels will find one or more of these quick tricks helpful. If I learn any new ones, I'll be sure to pass them along.

Lessons Learned

If you do a Google search on "battle maps," you'll discover some pretty cool blogs that compare different kinds of dungeon-building tools, including wet-erase and dry-erase battle maps, dungeon tiles, 3D terrain, and whatnot. Ultimately, you must choose the map medium that works best for you (and the dungeon in question), but there's something to be said for the simplicity and artistry of a hand-drawn map. While it's true I have a steady hand and can draw a decent circle, I'm no artist. I rely on little tricks such as these to fool my players into thinking otherwise.

Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Last Week's Poll Results

How would you like to end your current campaign?		
With a big end-of-the-world scenario. (This is 2012, after all.)	384	19.4%
With a big fight.	356	17.9%
By tying up all the loose ends, then sticking a fork in it.	339	17.1%
With a teaser for the next campaign.	275	13.9%
With the PCs ascending to godhood—lord help the multiverse.	151	7.6%
Whatchu talkin' about, Perkins? My campaign NEVER ENDS!	143	7.2%
With lots of meaningful character deaths.	96	4.8%
With pizza and cupcakes and beer.	92	4.6%
With a flash-forward to show my players what miserable old people their characters turned into.	55	2.8%
Abruptly, without fanfare.	34	1.7%
By flying away on my umbrella like Mary Poppins.	30	1.5%
With lots of ignominious character deaths, to punish my players for the hell they put me through.	29	1.5%
Total	**1984**	**100.0%**

The Dungeon Master Experience: Poll #51A

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The Dungeon Master Experience Archive | 2/16/2012
Article Header Image
The Circus Is In Town
The Dungeon Master Experience
Chris Perkins

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*This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my **Dungeons & Dragons** campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.*

If you're interested in learning more about the world of Iomandra, check out the wiki.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The heroes have done the impossible. Using words rather than weapons, they've united the Sea Kings of Iomandra against a common threat, and they did it without the legendary magical cutlass that has long been a symbol of unity among the feuding seafaring merchant-lords. The heroes made a play for the weapon earlier in the campaign, wresting it from the clutches of the pirate-warlord Vantajar, but it plunged into a sea of acid in the Elemental Chaos and was forever lost to them. Instead, they turned to an old, half-forgotten Sea King who once wielded the weapon, and he helped them lure his fellow Sea Kings to a summit at Krakenholt before passing away of old age. Left to their own devices, the heroes made a roleplaying pitch for a temporary truce and succeeded! Not bad for a tiefling, a deva-turned-eladrin (long story), a gnome, a goliath, a warforged, a pit fiend (another long story), and a human dimwit.

I 'm of two minds when it comes to the plethora of race options in the D&D game. On the one hand, I like that players have a diverse selection of races to choose from. On the other hand, it occasionally bothers me that "core" races such as humans, elves, dwarves, and halflings often get pushed to the

sidelines in favor of the more oddball races, the end results of which are adventuring parties that look like circus freak shows.

Were they freaks in a circus, my Wednesday night player characters would have such colorful names as the Devil-Man, the World's Shortest Man, the Man of a Thousand Deaths, the World's Biggest Man, Mister Metallo, the Prince of Darkness, and the World's Dumbest Man (so named because Mat Smith plays his human character as an idiot savant). Interestingly, of the nonhumans, the only one who bothers to hide his true appearance when traveling abroad is the tiefling. The rest of them parade around like they own the world, which, come to think of it, they do.

Sometimes I feel like the D&D game needs a rule that says "Every adventuring party needs at least two humans and at least one elf, halfling, or dwarf," just so all D&D adventuring parties retain that Fellowship of the Ring feel. I would never endorse such a rule, although I can't help but wonder why I didn't set a cap on "uncommon races" at the start of my campaign. Maybe it's because I'm not sure that's a good idea. Again, I like that a player can build virtually any character he can imagine, but I can't help wondering how many race options a campaign (not to mention the game) really needs.

I've never imposed race restrictions on my players. *It doesn't matter what they play*, I tell myself. *I can always modify the campaign to provide entertaining stories based on their choices*. I think that's the real reason why I've never told my players what they can and can't play — because I'm willing to make whatever adjustments are needed to account for the players' choices. Sometimes an oddball choice makes me discover something about the campaign even I didn't know. When Andrew Finch expressed an interest in retiring his revenant character and playing a goliath, it gave me a chance to think about how goliaths fit into my world, which is something I hadn't considered before. Andrew asked me for a list of goliath tribes around which he could build a rich character background, which I happily provided and keep handy for that inevitable occasion when the party encounters one of them.

Iomandra is a draco-centric world where dragons and dragonborn rule supreme, and all other races are secondary or tertiary, so I've already upset the "natural order" evinced by the default human-centric D&D campaign. Oddly enough, there are no dragonborn in the party (although there used to be, until Trevor Kidd moved away and took his dragonborn paladin with him). That puts the party at a political disadvantage, particularly when dealing with the domineering Dragovar Empire. And yet, the fact that they were recently declared "princes of the empire" for saving the Emperor's life is so much sweeter because none of them is a dragonborn. And sometimes being a freak show works to their advantage, such as when they had to unite the Sea Kings of Iomandra, who are themselves a mixed bag of races.

Over the past four years, I can recall a number of instances where the racial composition of the party worked to its advantage or disadvantage, and I always enjoyed the situations and conflicts that arose, allowing me to reward (and occasionally punish) players for the choices they made. I've given Chris Youngs a ton of grief for playing a tiefling, mostly because tieflings in my world are viewed throughout Dragovar society as untrustworthy troublemakers and "bad luck." My campaign also uses warforged primarily as antagonists, so Nacime Khemis's warforged character is often suspect or, worse, feared. Since Chris Champagne's pit fiend joined the group, he's mostly been confined to the party's ship—he wouldn't dare walk the streets of Io'calioth without some kind of magical disguise. As inconvenient as that sounds, there are obvious advantages to having a pit fiend in the party, and it's my job to create situations that make Chris glad he's playing a pit fiend character. (Hang in there, Chris! It's coming, I promise!)

Most of us know what it's like to be the outsider. To be on the fringe. To be in the minority. Moreover, the outsider archetype crops up in films, TV, comics, and literature all the time. When you have a party of exotic characters running around, it seems natural that the theme of "outsiders in the world" would rear its head from time to time in the campaign. Is that something you're willing to deal with?

Lessons Learned

The D&D game has, over the years, expanded the number of race options available to players, and we all have our own thoughts about that. I'm grateful because the Iomandra campaign wouldn't exist if someone hadn't bothered to create the dragonborn, but I also dread the day when the party gnome dies and Curt asks me if it'll be okay to play a kenku, a minotaur, or some fool thing.

When I sit down to create my next D&D campaign, it behooves me to tell my players what the world is like, what races are integral to the story of the world, and what races I'm not building the world around. That will help guide their character-making decisions without stifling their creativity. If they want to play something exotic, at least they know up front that they're playing an outsider.

If your adventuring party looks like a walking, talking freak show, you have two ways to deal with it. You can play down the party's freakish nature and run the campaign as though the players' racial choices don't really matter in the grand scheme of things, or you can build stories and roleplaying opportunities around the freak show and make that part of the texture of your campaign. Both choices are fair ones, and you can have it both ways.

Even though I've embraced the Wednesday night freak show, there are adventures where the party's racial composition really doesn't matter. When my heroes are waging war on the high seas against Sea King Senestrago, their sometime nemesis, the party's racial diversity provides some tactically useful racial traits and that's about it. The same would be true if the characters were exploring some monster-ridden dungeon. A gang of trolls or a hungry otyugh isn't going to blink twice at a party composed of six different races. However, when my players are negotiating with the Ironstar Cartel or subjecting themselves to inspection by a passing Dragovar warship, they'll need to give serious thought about what to do with their less innocuous companions, and that becomes an added challenge.

I can imagine building a campaign where the stories I wanted to tell preclude the inclusion of bizarre races such as wilden and shardminds, and I might urge my players not to select these races, but would I forbid them? Probably not. It's their campaign, too, after all. It does beg the question of how much different my campaign would be with plantfolk and crystalfolk running around. The answer? Only as different as I want to make it.

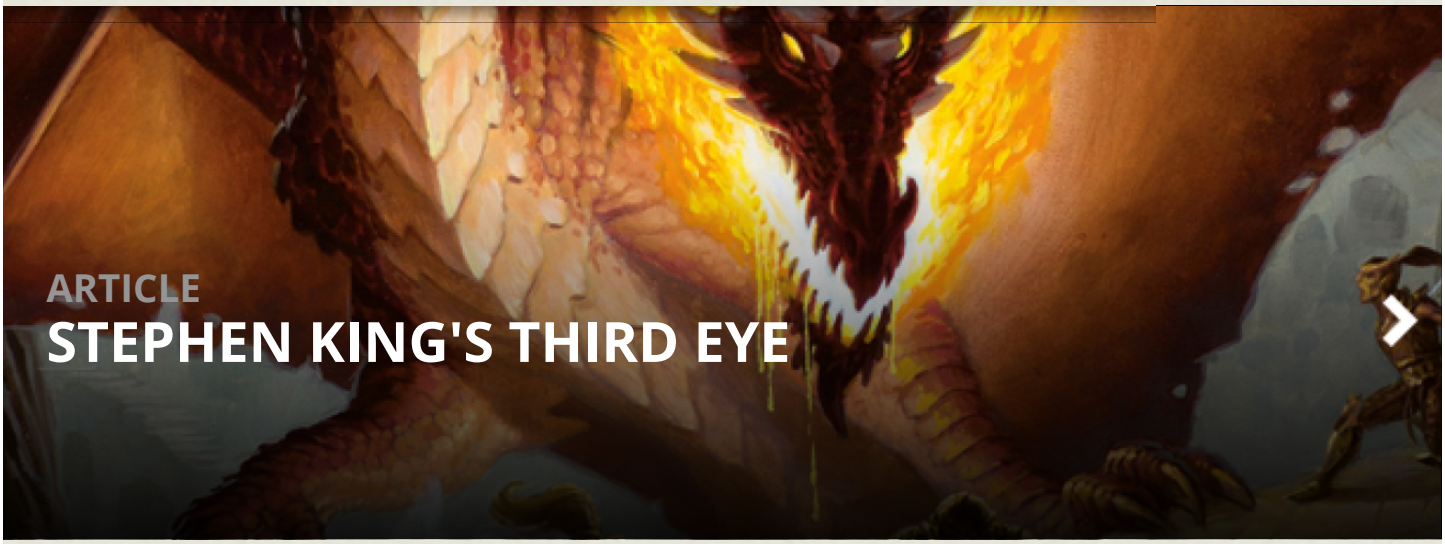
Until the next encounter!

—Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

Last Week's Polls

Hey DMs: How often do you use wet-erase battle maps when running your D&D games?		
Always.	749	30.6%
More often than not.	666	27.2%
Occasionally.	560	22.9%
Never.	471	19.3%
Total	**2446**	**100.0%**

Hey DMs: How would you rate your wet-erase battle map fu?		
My map fu could use more fu.	1279	53.4%



ARTICLE

STEPHEN KING'S THIRD EYE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. *An iron-wrought spiral staircase leads to an octagonal room. A few paces from the top of the staircase are a cluttered desk and a chair with a haversack slung over its back. Drapes conceal the windows, and a 10-foot-wide circular rug adorned with a silver pentagram covers the floor. Hanging on the far wall is a majestic tapestry depicting a war in Hell, and standing next to it is the tiefling crime lord, Dorethau Vadu. With an Infernal command, she summons two pit fiends. The devils step through the tapestry as though it was a doorway, and the stench of brimstone follows them. Roll initiative!*

While I find the various *Dungeon Master's Guides* fun reads, they taught me little about how to DM. It's much easier to learn by watching someone else do it. Sadly, I didn't have any role modelsno older siblings or friends under whose wing I could learn the tricks and pitfalls of being a DM. Before I joined Wizards of the Coast, I was the only DM in my neighborhood. I dimly recall the odd time when I actually got to sit on the opposite side of the DM screen and play a character, but they were short and often forgettable experiences. Inevitably, the DM would lose interest after a session or two, and I'd be back behind the screen, doing what it seems I was born to do. It wasn't until I joined Wizards that I actually became a regular player, most notably in Monte Cook's Ptolus campaign and its lesser-known precursor, Praemal. Therefore, it's no

surprise that I don't have any DM role models. There are, however, many people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude every time I write or run a D&D adventure, and Stephen King is one of them.

Before I tell you how an American horror writer made me a better DM, I need to explain a little bit about my own literary background. I'm an English major with a degree in Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and one of my most memorable courses at the University of Waterloo was a literature class called Imitatio. Our weekly assignment consisted of taking some distinguished piece of literature, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and writing long-lost passages in the same style as the original work. By analyzing Milton's technique and stealing glimpses into his mind's eye, one could (in theory) appreciate the depth, intricacy, and nuance of the man's work enough to create something Milton himself might have written, albeit on an off day. It's like taking an art class and being asked to paint the Mona Lisa's long-lost sister, or better yet, the rest of the Mona Lisa, as though you were Leonardo da Vinci himself and not just some *poseur*. Imitating Stephen King wasn't part of the curriculum, probably because it was 1990 and his work wasn't considered "literature" at the time. That same year, I had a rather pedestrian and forgettable senior class in creative writing, for which I wrote a screenplay that was a rip-off of the film *Heathers* and a short story titled "A Day in the Life of My Dog," written from my dog's point of view. Never mind the fact that my dog, Taboo, was dead two years. Only in hindsight does it occur to me that I should've written about a day in the *afterlife* of my dog. That would've been a riot.

In that otherwise pointless creative writing class, I stumbled upon a short essay written by a contemporary American fiction writer who by that time had cranked out more than a dozen popular horror novels, including one about dead pets. Stephen King's essay is titled "Imagery and the Third Eye," and it taught me a great deal about writing fiction and DMing. It turns out these two activities are kissing cousins! Creative writing and DMing are both firmly grounded in the ancient art of storytelling, the only difference being that one is primarily a written activity and the other primarily oral.

Let me ask you something, you're a DM: *Have you ever wanted to write a novel?* I'm betting the answer's *yes*. I'm betting you've actually written one or more, or maybe half of one. Maybe you wrote only the first chapter before the characters got stale or the process frightened you off. DMs are by nature *storytellers*, so I'd be mildly shocked to learn that you've never once imagined your name (or dorky pseudonym) on a novel jacket or in the credits of a movie based on your fictional creation. I certainly have, although I must admit that novel writing isn't my bag. I'd rather write an adventure or a screenplay. I crave *structure*. I'm a creature who needs a *cage*.

If you're telling me that you've never wanted to write a novel or a screenplay, then, well, I guess I don't believe you, simple as that. You're a *liar, liar, pants on fire*. Dungeon Mastering is storytelling in the ancient oral tradition, and storytellers have a primal need to share stories. If I stole a glimpse into the nooks and crannies of your hard drive, would I find a partially written novel or screenplay locked away in that extradimensional madhouse? I bet I would!

We DMs can learn a lot from a storyteller as successful and experienced as King.

"Imagery and the Third Eye" is readily available online in case you want to read it. It's still as fresh and true today as when King wrote it, lo those many years ago. I highly recommend it for all writers and all DMs. I can't promise it'll take you to the same place creatively that it transported mea million miles from Nowhere, Canada to an amusement park where all the rides are free. However, I can promise you that you'll learn at least one trick that'll make you a better Dungeon Master.

It's easy to take Stephen King for granted, in much the same way we take American processed cheese for granted. He's a fixture of our time. The best scare Little Stevie ever laid on us happened waaaay back in 1999. A careless Maine driver sent him flying pell-mell over the pearly gates of Heaven. Fortunately for us, he flew clear over Heaven and fell back to Earth, and in the years since that fateful collision of bone and steel, he's written some damn fine stories and received the equivalent of a literary knighthood. The duly appointed guardians of Literature were willing to overlook King's past success and all those f-bombs, and now he's become part of the pantheon of American literary elite.

Just so you know where I stand on King's work, the man can do no wrong, even when he fails spectacularly. His characterizations are as deep and unsettling as the Mariana Trench, and nearly all of his work is eminently re-readable. I've read *'Salem's Lot*, *The Tommyknockers*, and *Dolores Claiborne* each three times. *Pet Sematary* and *It*, five times. *Misery*, eight times. (That Annie Wilkes is hot!) I'm re-reading *Duma Key* now for the second time, and I'm long overdue for a reunion with *Eyes of the Dragon* (the closest King ever came to writing a D&D novel). But let's put his fiction aside and talk about King's nonfiction, starting with "Imagery and the Third Eye."

LESSONS LEARNED

So let's get on with it, shall we?

As a Dungeon Master, my first job is to immerse my players in the world I've created, and to do that I need to describe what their characters see, hear, and smell. In other words, I need to be able to *set the scene*. Knowing what to describe and what not to describe is crucial. If I focus on the wrong details, it can be a tiresome or laughable experience for the players. As King says in *On Writing*, it's not just a question of how to describe something, but *how much to*.

In "Imagery and the Third Eye," King talks about creating an image in the mind's eye (what he calls the "third eye") of his reader. He doesn't aim to supply a "photograph in words" but rather gives his reader just enough detail to paint a picture for him or herself. It doesn't matter that the picture isn't exactly the same as the one King sees with his own third eye:

> *"Too many beginning writers feel that they have to assume the entire burden of imagery; to become the reader's seeing-eye dog. That is simply not the case. Use vivid verbs. Avoid the passive voice. Avoid the clichÃ©. Be specific. Be precise. Be elegant. Omit needless words."*
> Stephen King, "Imagery and the Third Eye"

King pulls a specific example from his own work, a paragraph describing the haunted

house from his second novel, *'Salem's Lot*. Allow me to present a similar example some read-aloud text plucked from the pages of a famous D&D adventure, *The Temple of Elemental Evil* by Gary Gygax and Frank Mentzer:

> *Lurid light from a flaming cresset and a glowing brazier full of charcoal reveals a 30-foot-by-20-foot chamber containing a rack, iron maiden, cage, and all the other unspeakable devices common to a torture chamber. Two adjacent, 10-foot-square alcoves, one to the south and one east, are barred, their doors held fast by chain and padlock. Two prisoners are in each, obviously here to await the tender mercies of the torturers. Two female humans are in the south alcove, and two orcs in the east.*

Players might have trouble envisioning a "flaming cresset" if they don't know what a cresset is, but that's probably okay since the description offers sufficient context. The room dimensions aren't belabored, and they give players a good sense of the space into which their characters are moving. The text stumbles a bit as it describes the arrangement of the alcoves (almost demanding that the DM provide an accompanying map), but it rights itself quickly with the "doors held fast by chain and padlock." By the end, we have a pretty clear image of the room.

What the read-aloud text doesn't do is provide a laborious account of every torture device, nor does it describe what the cell doors are made of. It feeds us the major features (the rack, iron maiden, cage, and alcoves) and leaves the rest to our imaginations. Similarly, it doesn't paint a detailed picture of the prisoners. Are the two women similar in appearance or different? What color is their hair? Are they clothed or naked? None of these details is presented; that's what the listener brings to it.

Imagery does not occur on the page but in the listener's mind. As a DM, the trick is determining which details are important and which details are left for the players to imagine. As a general rule, I tend to under-describe things at first, then allow players to ask questions if they're having trouble seeing the picture in their mind's eye.

Here's another example pulled straight from King's work:

> *Lookhere's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.*
> Stephen King, *On Writing*

While not the best piece of writing in history, as King points out, it's adequate for making the point that nowhere in the description do we get the shape or exact dimensions of the cage. The cage I see with my third eye won't be the same cage you see with yours, but that's okay. If adventurers happen upon the cage, its shape and dimensions might become relevant if they decide to stuff it inside a *bag of holding*, but otherwise who cares? What's *important* is the numeral on the rabbit's back, a detail deliberately placed at the end of the descriptive passage for emphasis. (That's another lesson I've learned: If you want your players to remember a particular detail, save it for last.)

There are no shortcuts to figuring out what details to focus on. The storyteller learns by asking him or herself, *What should I emphasize?* If all else fails, be specific, be precise, be elegant, and omit needless words.

We can learn just as much, if not more, from bad examples. Here's an example of a room description that might be read-aloud text or something the DM conjures out of thin air. It isn't horrible but could use a little work:

> *"You enter a 40-foot-by-40-foot square chamber with a domed ceiling 20 feet above. Six feet from the entrance, you see a statue. Other statues are scattered about the room. Hanging from the ceiling by iron chains is a heavy iron chandelier, beneath which is a dead basilisk. The room has no other exits, far as you can tell."*

The text does a serviceable job of describing the room and its contents. It would be nice to know how the room is lit (are there candles or torches burning in the chandelier?), and more attention needs to be spent describing the statues; it's hard to get a good mental picture without knowing what they depict. Do they look like unfortunate souls who crossed paths with the basilisk before it died? We don't need a detailed description of every one, mind you.

One could make a case for not describing the basilisk as "dead" but rather "still." The players might assume incorrectly that it's asleep and try to sneak up on it, only to discover someone or something beat them to it! One could also make a case for using the word "basilisk" at all. By instead referring to it as a "giant, six-legged lizard," you let the players jump to their own conclusions.

The dead basilisk is by far the room's most interesting feature, but it's buried in terms of importance by the last sentence. Perhaps the lack of other exits is information that could be tacked onto the first sentence, where the room's general configuration is described. Also, the phrase "far as you can tell" is basically shorthand for saying *Hey, stupid! Don't forget to search this room for secret doors!* If that was the intent, mission accomplished. Otherwise, the passage would be fine without it.

On the topic of omitting needless words, you don't need "40-foot-by-40-foot" and "square" in the same expression, and "a 20-foot-high domed ceiling" is better than "a domed ceiling 20 feet above." *Above?* I mean, *c'mon*, where else would the ceiling be?

Here's how I might revise the description:

"You enter a 40-foot-square chamber with a 20-foot-high domed ceiling and no other exits. Six feet from the entrance, a statue of an armored dwarf clutches a stony battleaxe. Three more statues are scattered about the room, all of them depicting adventurers.

Hanging from the ceiling by chains is an iron chandelier set with sputtering torches. Beneath it a giant, six-legged lizard lies perfectly still."

IN CONCLUSION . . .

Most DMs describe things on the fly. In such cases, it's doubly important to **use vivid verbs**, **avoid the passive voice**, **avoid the clichÃ©**, **be specific**, **be precise**, **be elegant**, and **omit needless words**. It's not like you can go back and revise your work, after all. My general rule of thumb is that if you can't describe a scene, a character, or an event in 30 seconds or less, your players are suffering needlessly. Any DM who's tried to run a published adventure with a full column of read-aloud text knows exactly what I mean; by the time you get to the end, the players are bored to tears and remember only one-tenth of what they've heard.

Next week, I'll share with you a few bits of DM wisdom I picked up from reading Stephen King's *On Writing* and his earlier nonfiction work, *Danse Macabre*. It'll be a Frankenstein's monster, the stitching together of various tips and tricks; I promise the experience will be eye opening and appropriately terrifying.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

THE STORYTELLING KING

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The heroes have summoned the Sea Kings to Krakenholt to discuss an alliance. Conspicuous by his absence is their hated enemy, Sea King Senestrago. When he finally shows up, he brings his entire fleet with him and attacks his Sea King rivals, triggering a massive naval engagement.

The heroes board Senestrago's flagship and begin kicking ass, but the tide turns. They're spending a LOT of healing surges, they're spreading their damage too thinly among too many enemies, and Senestrago's escort ships are sending reinforcements. Back and forth the battle rages until Senestrago appears from below decks. Before the PCs can focus fire on him, a red dragon plucks the Sea King from the battle and spirits him away to safety. After two sessions of combat, Senestrago's flagship is destroyed, and the remains of his fleet are scattered to the four winds.

Rather than let Senestrago regain his strength, the heroes chase him all the way back to his secret base on the island of Hyragos. There, the defeated Sea King negotiates with dwarven agents of the Ironstar Cartel to procure a massive iron torpedo capable of obliterating a small island. Senestrago plans to use it against

Krakenholt, but when the PCs are spotted sneaking onto the island, one of the Ironstar Cartel dwarves rigs the torpedo's timer to explode in 10 rounds. While the party's goliath battlemind single-handedly confronts and kills the red dragon, the other PCs try to disarm the torpedo, prevent the Ironstar Cartel ship from escaping, and confront the evil Sea King. When all's said and done, the dragon is slain, the bomb is disarmed, the ship is stopped, but Senestrago once again escapes amid the chaos. I, for one, am very surprised. Delighted, but surprised.

I believe that I possess the four basic qualities of a good DM: I'm fair, I improvise well, I'm self-aware enough to recognize my strengths and weaknesses, and I don't take myself or my campaign too seriously. About a third of everything else that defines my DMing style came to me the same way a skier learns to fly and a guitarist learns to rock the house: *years of practice*. Another third came from reading fiction (primarily horror, science fiction, and fantasy) and nonfiction (primarily ancient history). The rest I picked up from various actors, directors, and writers.

DMing is a complex activity that demands a lot of skills. The ability to describe things in a succinct yet evocative way is something I learned from Stephen King, and it was the subject of last week's article. This week, I'd like to share with you a few snippets from two of King's nonfiction works, *On Writing* and *Danse Macabre*. A lot of his discoveries about writing fiction (and not just horror fiction) also apply to DMing, which, as I've said before, is a similar kind of storytelling.

LESSONS LEARNED

Let me share with you some of my favorite passages from *On Writing* and *Danse Macabre* and explain how they've helped shape my own DMing style. Do they ring as true for you as they do for me? If what King is saying strikes you as wrong or unsettling, like the off angles in Shirley Jackson's Hill House, I urge you not to turn away but study them more closely, for these aren't the ramblings of a madman but the revelations of a master storyteller.

1. Start with a "what if."

> *The most interesting situations can usually be expressed as a What-if question: What if vampires invaded a small New England village?* ('Salem's Lot) *What if a policeman in a remote Nevada town went berserk and started killing everyone in sight?* (Desperation) *What if a cleaning woman suspected of a murder she got away with (her husband) fell under suspicion for a murder she did not commit (her employer)?* (Dolores Claiborne) *What if a young mother and her son became trapped in their stalled car by a rabid dog?* (Cujo). SK
>
> King asserts that he never writes outlines for his novels and never gets hung up on plot. In fact, he regards plot with great suspicion. Instead, he creates characters, puts them into "what if" situations, and lets the story evolve from there.

When I prep an adventure for my D&D campaign, I don't waste time and effort trying to plan what the outcome will be. I'll let the players' actions and the random die rolls determine that. But when I'm trying to come up with adventure ideas, I do it in much the same way King does (or rather, the way I envision he does). It starts with a what-if question:

- What if a tiefling player character who died the previous session came back as a pit fiend?
- What if the Raven Queen commanded one of the characters to kill his companions because they know her true name?
- What if the party's ship was possessed by a succubus who died aboard the vessel?
- What if someone found a warforged pinned under an anchor at the bottom of the sea?
- What if the heroes discovered a network of secret demiplanes used by worshipers of Vecna to spy on the Maimed Lord's enemies?
- What if Sea King Senestrago decided to attack his rivals during a summit at Krakenholt?

Once I have a good *what-if* situation, I can let the story develop naturally over the course of however many sessions it takes. I might need to prepare a map and gather some stat blocks and miniatures ahead of time, but the plot isn't something I need to worry about, since that depends greatly on how the player characters react to the situation (and that, my friends, is beyond my control).

WHAT IF WE HAD WINGS? THAT'D BE PRETTY AWESOME.
YEAH! FLYIN' PIRANHA! COOL!
AND LASERS!
SOME POOR SAP JUST FELL IN THE WATER! LET'S GO EAT HIS FACE!

2. Never mind the plot.

> *I'm not able to guess with any accuracy how the damned thing is going to turn out, even with my inside knowledge of coming events, and . . . why worry about the ending anyway? Why be such a control freak? Sooner or later every story comes out* somewhere. SK

The best D&D adventures allow players to make real decisions that affect its outcome. Many plot-driven adventures make the mistake of driving toward a specific endpoint, such that the PCs' actions and decisions are of little consequence. On the one hand, as a DM it's nice to know where the campaign is heading in general, but on the other hand, an adventure that *requires* the villain to escape or *requires* that the heroes be captured is just badly designed. The plot has basically rendered all other options inert, and that usually leaves players with the awful sense that they're trapped in a novel that you've already written.

DMs who are control freaks aren't self-aware enough to realize the fact, nor do they realize that their controlling behavior can trigger different forms of player rebellion. When a DM approaches me at a convention and asks for advice on dealing with unruly or disengaged players, one of the questions I ask is, "Do your players feel empowered?" This is sometimes met with a blank, confused stare. A DM can't cage players like animals and expect them to behave. As soon as players realize that they have no control over their characters' destinies, their attention quickly turns to finding ways to break out of their cages, and once they've broken free, they'll begin to run amok, resisting all attempts to lock them up again. Better to show them that they're the masters of their characters' destinies, and their choices are what shape the outcome of an adventure or a campaign.

In a recent Wednesday night game, my PCs had the villain cornered in his lair. Sea King Senestrago only escaped certain death because the party split up. Distracted by a ticking doomsday weapon, a huge red dragon, and a fleeing Ironstar Cartel ship, they tried to fight too many battles at once. Throughout the adventure, I kept thinking, *this feels like a good time for the villain to die*. Frankly I was surprised he got away, but his decision to flee was perfectly consistent with his cowardly nature. Will the party ever face him again? I have no clue. It's really up to the player characters. It's all about *them*, not the plot.

3. Looks aren't everything.

> *I can't remember many cases where I felt I had to describe what the people in a story of mine looked likeI'd rather let the reader supply the faces, the builds, and the clothing as well . . . Nor do I think physical description should be a shortcut to character.* SK

Of the thousands of NPCs in my campaign, most are faceless "extras" with no lines of dialogue. These minor NPCs add texture and verisimilitude to the campaign, little

more, though on occasion one of them will get a name and a touch of personality. A few hundred NPCs have more significant roles to play in my campaign, and these major NPCs receive the bulk of my creative attention. However, I've taken King's point to heart. The only time I describe an NPC's physical appearance is when there's a story behind it. A dwarf that walks with a crutch is interesting because there's a story there: how was the dwarf injured? By comparison, a dwarf with blue eyes and a white beard is far less interesting, at least to me, because there's nothing to build on. That character would be better served having a unique voice, a quirk, or a specific manner that the players are likely to associate with that NPC (and that NPC alone) for the remainder of the campaign.

If you have relatively few NPCs in your campaign, each one can be a complex, multi-layered character. The Iomandra campaign has scores of them, so I've adopted the standard of giving each of my major NPCs one identifiable *thing* that truly defines them, and that certain something varies from NPC to NPC. It's not always a unique voice, for example:

- Nyrrska, a dragonborn assassin, has a scar across his throat and speaks with a raspy voice. How did he get that scar, one wonders.
- Zirko Axaran, a plane-hopping dwarf from the world of Greyhawk, likes to enumerate when he speaks: "There were three of them, I tell you! Not ONE, not TWO, but THREE!"
- Excellence the tiefling is wise beyond her years, to the point where the players trust that she's never wrong. They can always count on her advice.
- Anchor, a barnacle-encrusted warforged salvaged from the bottom of the Dragon Sea, is mute. He doesn't read or write, so he communicates by nodding or shaking his head.
- Sea King Senestrago is a coward at heart. Nothing is more important than his own life, and he'll never stand toe-to-toe with an enemy if it means he might be physically hurt in any way.

Two above-mentioned NPCs have identifiable physical characteristics, and both of them come with a story. Nyrrska had his throat slashed by the dragonborn pirate warlord Vantajar and was raised from the dead, but the scar remained. Anchor's barnacles tell the story of how his ship sank and the months he spent alone, trapped at the bottom of the sea.

4. Let dialogue define.

> *It's dialogue that gives your cast their voices, and is crucial in defining their characters.* SK

Imagine you're running an encounter with a mad troll who carries around a stuffed doll with one missing eye. The doll's name is Candy. Also, the troll likes to taunt its prey. You might choose to have the troll say nothing during the encounter. You might choose to describe what the troll is saying in the third person ("The troll hurls insults at you."), or you can "inhabit" the troll and speak in its voice ("Candy doesn't like you!

She says you nothin' but a meat sack!") You tell me, which version of the troll are the players likely to remember?

I like to inhabit my major NPCs, to "act them out," as it were. Conversely, with minor NPCs I'm more inclined to adopt a third-person voice ("The shopkeeper takes your money and thanks you profusely for your patronage.") I find that when I crawl into an NPC's skin and speak in its voice, the players are more inclined to engage that NPC in a meaningful dialogue. If I don't, my players take it as a sign (i.e., *Chris is telling me this NPC isn't very important right now*) and move on. One of the Wednesday group's favorite NPCs is Nyrrska, the dragonborn ex-assassin who serves aboard their ship. He doesn't do much onscreen, but when he speaks, it's always me speaking in his voice, and the undercurrent of menace in his raspy words makes the PCs glad he's on their side.

They say actions speak louder than words, but that's not always true. We judge people and characters just as well and as often by what they say and how they say it. In the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, how important is dialogue to the character of Hannibal Lector (played by Anthony Hopkins)? In the first half of the film, everything we know and fear about Lector is learned by observing his eerie stillness and paying attention to what he says, how he says it, and how Clarice Starling reacts. Dialogue *defines* that character.

5. Learn by osmosis.

> *When I read Ray Bradbury as a kid, I wrote like Ray Bradburyeverything green and wondrous and seen through a lens smeared with the grease of nostalgia. When I read James M. Cain, everything I wrote came out clipped and stripped and hardboiled. When I read Lovecraft, my prose became luxurious and Byzantine. I wrote stories in my teenage years where all these styles merged, creating a kind of hilarious stew. This sort of stylistic blending is a necessary part of developing one's own style.* SK

I learned to write adventures by reading adventures. In fact, when I was twelve years old, I used to build covers for my adventures out of construction paper and model my designs after the 1st Edition modules in my collection. I even glued the maps to the inside panels and used the covers as DM screens. As for the adventures themselves . . . well, my maps were Gygaxian labyrinths crafted my mad wizards, and my prose was akin to the early works of Len Lakofka and Tom Moldvay. But then I discovered Tracy and Laura Hickman, and suddenly all of my maps made more sense and the encounters were written with "Trick/Trap" and "Lore" sections like *The Desert of Desolation* module series. When I needed adventure and encounter ideas, I turned to the "U" and "UK" series for inspiration because I enjoyed their complex plots and clever use of weird *Fiend Folio* monsters.

While I didn't have any DM role models, I think it's safe to say one can learn a lot about DMing by playing in someone else's campaign. In *On Writing*, King says that a bad novel can teach one about the art of writing as much as, if not more than, a good one. The same is true for DMs. Those of you who attend gaming conventions know that there are plenty of awesome DMs out there plus a handful of dreadful ones who lack the self-awareness to realize just how bad they are. If you survive a horrible DM

experience, talk to your players about it. Tell them why you think the DM sucked, and pay close attention to their eyes and body language. If during the conversation they avoid making eye contact with you or give you that awkwardly measured silence, they may be telling you something about weaknesses in your own DMing style!

Ultimately, you have to be your own brand of DM. You can learn things from others and steal the best of what other DMs have to offer, but no two DMs are exactly alike, and that's a good thing.

6. Let character, not event, steer the ship.

> *The best stories always end up being about the people rather than the event, which is to say character-driven.* SK

I think most DMs would agree with the above statement. It's the actions/inaction and decisions/indecision of the characters that propel the story forward or not. Some DMs become overly concerned when the story flounders and the PCs waste time harassing townsfolk, discussing options, planning their own little side ventures, and engaging in all manner of distractions that have nothing to do with the adventure. As long as the players are "in character" or focused on the campaign world (as opposed to, say, distracted by the *real world*), I'm willing to cut them some slack.

Monte Cook once confessed to me that some of his favorite campaign moments are the ones where he doesn't have to do anything but sit and listen to the players talk among themselves about what their characters should do next. He also spoke fondly of those unplanned, unscripted moments when our characters wandered around the streets of Ptolus, engaging inconsequential NPCs in conversation, tying up loose business, or enjoying some insidious sideline escapade (Erik Mona!). As long as all the players are having a good time, there's no reason why the adventure can't wait. If one or more of the players seem eager to get on with it, then as a DM I feel it's within my right to push the story forward by whatever means necessary. There are times when character development needs to take a back seat to ACTION, which is not to say you can't have character development while action is taking place. On the contrary, we learn lot about characters by watching them in action.

What King is saying touches on the fact that he doesn't know what's going to happen in his novels until it happens. In that respect, he's as much the reader as the novelist. Often his characters will do things and say things that surprise him. He doesn't say, "At this point in the novel, Annie Wilkes needs to get hit in the head with a typewriter because it'll be shocking and ironic." Similarly, it would be presumptuous for me to assume that Sea King Senestrago will escape and live to fight another day because I have another adventure planned in which he captures the PCs and makes them cry uncle. If he escapes, it'll be because the heroes gave him an opening and it's his nature to flee rather than fight.

7. Put the party on a teeter-totter.

> *All fantasy fiction is essentially about the concept of power; great fantasy fiction is about people who find it at great cost or lose it tragically; mediocre fantasy fiction is about people who have it and never lose it but simply wield it.*

SK

I take this to mean that good drama is all about the constant shifting of power. Take J.R.R. Tolkien's character of Gollum, who finds the One Ring and gains unnaturally long life, but at great cost. At some point, Gollum simply has to lose the ringthere wouldn't be much of a story otherwise. Consider also the character of Tyrion Lannister, the dwarf in George R.R. Martin's Westeros novels, and how much less compelling he would be if everything went his way. Conversely, imagine if Tyrion was always being crushed underfoot and never gained the upper hand. Part of the reason why Tyrion is such a great character is that he has both ups and downs, moments in the story when things are going his way and moments when the whole world threatens to crush him.

In a recent session of the Wednesday night campaign, I threw an entire fleet of bad guys at the heroes and nearly overwhelmed them, to the point where they were powerless to stop Senestrago from abandoning ship. The very next session, they were back on the offensive and cornering Sea King Senestrago in his island base. It's like a wave, with high points and low points marking times when the heroes feel powerful and powerless.

Many campaigns suffer and die either because the player characters feel powerful *all the time* or powerless *all the time*. A campaign that makes the PCs feel like they're teetering toward world domination one session and tottering toward oblivion the next is much more exciting. Power needs to be gained and lost, lost and gained.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

I AM DEVASTATORZ MEGABOMB, DESTROYER OF WORLDS!

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Things have gone poorly for the heroes of late, due in no small part to their recent actions and misadventures.

Several months ago in "campaign time," the player characters allowed a group of human terrorists to crash a flying citadel into Io'calioth, the capital city of the Dragovar Empire, and were spotted fleeing the scene on phantom steeds. After nearly a year of "real time," an unfinished quest finally lured them back to Io'calioth, whereupon they were recognized and accused of consorting with the terrorists. To make matters worse, the heroes had given the Vost Miraj (the imperial spy network) ample proof of their secret alliance with the Knights of Ardyn, a group of non-evil renegades wanted by the Dragovar Empire for treason. Despite the accusations lobbed against them, the heroes managed to deceive local authorities long enough to avoid arrest and immediately took refuge in the home of Torel Winterleaf, a powerful merchant and sometime ally. The heroes used the Winterleaf mansion as a base from which to launch an assault against a tiefling crime lord hiding in the city's martial district (the aforementioned "unfinished quest"). The assault didn't go as planned, and once again the Dragovar authorities swooped down upon them. Faced with a host of new criminal charges, the heroes

scattered to the four winds and reassembled at Lord Winterleaf's home, unaware that they were being tracked. A squad of dragonborn death knights sworn to defend the empire promptly seized the estate, but with assistance from Lord Winterleaf's daughter, Talia, the heroes escaped once more. Or, rather, most of them did.

There was a time not long ago when the heroes joined forces with the Knights of Ardyn and saved the Dragovar Empire, but news of their heroism has not yet reached individuals in power. So instead of being lauded as saviors of the empire, they're wanted criminals. Moreover, their human psion (played by Chris Dupuis) is dead, their human wizard (played by Jeremy Crawford) has been captured and placed aboard a Dragovar warship bound for the island prison of Zardkarath, their halfling rogue (played by Peter Schaefer) is in the clutches of the Vost Miraj, and their poor ally Lord Winterleaf has been arrested and charged with conspiracy and treason. Yes, I'm a foul DM, and I know it sounds unjust. But I prefer to think of it as fair turnabout for the mega-powerful magic item they acquired twenty levels ago.

I've said it before, but I think a strong campaign needs moments when the heroes feel like kings of the world and moments when they're on the ropes. Although the Monday group has enjoyed its fair share of trying times, they're in a real pickle now. There's nothing quite like watching epic-level heroes run for their lives, despite the fact that early in the campaign they gained some magic items and powers well beyond their level. It just goes to prove how much control a DM has over the balance of power.

At some point, every DM makes the "mistake" of handing out too much treasure or giving PCs access to magic items they probably don't deserve. I put the word "mistake" in quotation marks because, after years of DMing, I've come to the conclusion that it's not always a mistake to do so, and even if it is, it's easily corrected over time. When the Monday night game was still young, the 4th-level heroes traveled to the Feywild and fought an exiled fomorian witch with a glass eye that was actually a *+3 dragon orb* a level 12 magic item that allowed its wielder to dominate and control dragons at will. The heroes hailed from an island ruled by an evil green dragon overlord, and they needed the orb to defeat it, but the battle against the witch didn't go well. Thanks in part to the four faerie dragons under the witch's control, the heroes were captured and forced to complete a quest on the witch's behalf. By the time that business was concluded, they were 5th level and had found a way to break the fomorian witch's evil magic. They slew the giant and pried the *dragon orb* from her eye socket.

The *dragon orb* was a well-earned reward, far above what's considered appropriate treasure for a 5th-level party. Not only did the item make the battle against the green dragon overlord much easier, it played a prominent role in various other encounters throughout the heroic and paragon tier. If you've read my campaign wiki, you know

that dragons are *everywhere* in the Iomandra campaign. Every time I threw a dragon at the heroes, the *dragon orb* played a pivotal role in the outcome of the encounter. It gave the heroes a HUGE advantage. And y'know what? That turned out to be perfectly acceptable. My players loved it! The orb made them feel mighty powerful. They'd make a dragon attack its allies, divulge the location of its secret hoard, and other things I dare not mention.

As a DM, I enjoy giving player characters that sense of invincibility. Sometimes it's a cleverly crafted illusion that's dashed as soon as the next threat rears its ugly head, and other times it's genuine as happens when PCs get their hands on artifacts and other powerful items. It doesn't bother me if the players turn an otherwise challenging encounter into a cakewalk thanks to some "quick fix" item, killer spell, or clever trap. I say let 'em enjoy the moment, for surely the wheels of fate will grind them down next time. And if not then, surely the time after that!

Eventually the Monday night group surpassed their *+3 dragon orb* in terms of level. Realizing they could hardly get by without it, they paid tens of thousands of gold pieces to have the orb's enhancement bonus boosted. Wisest money they ever spent, too! Time and again, the orb proved invaluable, though once in a while a draconic adversary would resist the orb's spell and take umbrage. Because of these wonderful "uh-oh" moments, I've never felt a need to deprive the Monday nighters of their precious *dragon orb*. The same thing cannot be said for the Wednesday night group, which also came into possession of such an item. Early on in epic tier, the character wielding the orb fell unconscious and a fire titan, having witnessed the orb's effect on his red dragon companion, picked it up and crushed it in his hand. *Oh my*, the looks of horror on the players' faces! *WOO-HOO, Bastard DM rides again!* (The Monday night players can't be the only ones who suffer, am I right?)

To give this week's article a bit of meat, I'm attaching the *dragon orb* stat block I created for my 4th Edition game. You won't find this item in the D&D Character Builder or in any other published source because (1) it was designed specifically for my campaign and (2) a magic item with an at-will dominate power is insanely good, even if it affects only dragons. Feel free to hand out these orbs like cheap Halloween candy just brace yourself for the sugar rush!

Dragon Orb **Level 12+ Rare**

This 5-inch diameter crystal sphere is filled with scintillating mist that periodically assumes dragonlike forms.

Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Implement (Orb)

Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls

Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus against creatures with the dragon keyword

Property

Creatures with the dragon keyword that are within 20 squares of the orb take a penalty to attack rolls made against the orb wielder as well as a penalty to saving throws. These penalties are equal to the enhancement bonus of the orb.

Attack Power (charm) ✦ **At-Will** (Standard Action)

Attack: Close burst 10 (creatures with the dragon keyword in the burst); +17 vs. Will

Hit: The target is dominated until the end of your next turn.

Level 17: +22 vs. Will

Level 22: Close burst 20; +27 vs. Will

Level 27: Close burst 20; +32 vs. Will

Utility Power (psychic) ✦ **Daily** (Free Action)

Trigger: You hit at least one creature with the *dragon orb*'s attack power.

Effect: You slide one target hit with the *dragon orb*'s attack power up to 10 squares. That target also takes 1d6 psychic damage per plus of the orb, and the target is stunned until the start of your next turn.

LESSONS LEARNED

This week's "lesson" is a simple one, but it took me several campaigns to realize: It's okay to break the rules when it comes to doling out magic items, and a busted item doesn't need to spell a campaign's demise.

It's cool to give PCs items much too powerful for their level. Such items can help define characters in much the same way *Stormbringer* helps to define Elric or Guenhwyvar helps to define Drizzt. More than level-appropriate items, they become part of a character's (if not the entire adventuring party's) identity.

It's been my experience that a strong campaign is highly resistant to damage from world-destroying characters and their overpowered magic items. Just because

Devastatorz Megabomb, a king among overpowered characters, seems invincible at 5th level doesn't mean he won't get smacked around at 15th level or 25th level. As long as the campaign keeps forging ahead, you'll find ways to humble even the mightiest character.

Granted, an ill-gotten and ill-used magic item can negatively impact your enjoyment of the game. However, I urge you, fellow DM, not to take drastic action unless the item is also causing grief to one or more of your players. In that case, it's best to act quickly lest the campaign lose its charm. Here, then, are three tried-and-true ways to divorce a busted item from the party without simply making it disappear:

- You can put the heroes in dire situations where the busted item avails them not.
- You can have the busted item gain sentience, become willful, and lose its appeal.
- You can have a powerful deity show up, declare that the item is being recalled because of some manufacturer's defect, and hand its wielder a coupon for 25% off his or her next magic item purchase.

Okay, maybe that last suggestion isn't so great, but I'm sure you'll think of something clever if you're patient. And if you can't think of a clever way to separate Sir Megabomb from his world-shattering weapon of choice, share your concern with the players and ask them for advice on what should be done. But know this: throwing the whole campaign out the window isn't your only option.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

A LESSON IN MEDIOCRITY

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. As a consequence of several player absences, the group is smaller than normal—five players instead of seven. But no matter—a major battle had been fought and won the week before, and this week's session begins with the aftermath. The heroes have slain the red dragon Hyragos, driven off Sea King Senestrago, and claimed another ship for their burgeoning fleet. They've also freed three goliaths trapped in the dragon's prison and discovered three gold dragon eggs amid the dragon's hoard. Over the course of the evening, the heroes learn that the goliaths are criminals and exiles from their tribe. They stole the eggs in the hopes of unleashing a gold dragon's rage upon their tribe-mates, but by sheer misfortune they were captured while heading back to their island.

A bit of roleplaying bolstered by Insight checks is enough to convince the heroes that the goliaths are evil, and so the party's interest shifts to returning the gold dragon eggs to their rightful owner . . . which leads them to the gold dragon overlord of a nearby island called Damandaros. The dragon overlord and his mate are so grateful for the eggs' return that they bestow three honors upon the party: free ship repairs, exclusive trade rights for Sea King Silvereye (played by Rodney Thompson), and permission to erect a temple in Pelor's honor, which pleases the party's goliath battlemind, Ravok (played by Andrew Finch).

The session ends with Ravok taking his evil goliath kin to a desolate island aboard a submersible vessel captained by Nevin, one of Rodney Thompson's retired

characters, while the rest of the characters head to the raft-city of Anchordown in pursuit of their next quest. Halfway to their new home of exile, the goliath criminals break their bonds and try to seize the submersible vessel, but Ravok and Captain Nevin manage to kill them in what amounts to the only combat of the evening.

I might not be the best Dungeon Master in the world, but I'm good enough to know when I'm off my game, and this past Wednesday I was quite tired and out of sorts. My day had been filled with meetings, furious email exchanges, and the dousing of many fires. I had half a mind to cancel the game, but five of my seven players were eager to play, so, of course, the game must go on! My D&D players need their weekly fill of slaughter, Byzantine plots, and roleplaying.

My players are accustomed to NPCs infused with lifelike personalities. They like the funny accents, the first-person acting, and the witty repartee. But on this occasion, I was feeling lazy. I found myself describing what the NPCs say in the third person, rather than speaking with their voices. "The gold dragon thanks you for returning the eggs," and so on. There were also many times that evening where I said nothing at all, but rather listened to the players discuss their many options, including the ramifications of letting the three goliath exiles go free. Chris Champagne, one of the players, actually dozed off (I guess his day had been a lot like mine). To his credit, his character was physically absent for that part of the session, having used a teleportation circle to deliver Sea King Senestrago's captured concubines to another of the party's ships.

The long periods of DM silence went relatively unnoticed because the conscious players were fully engaged, plotting their next move. Normally I use moments such as these to chart the course of the campaign or scope out the next encounter, but on this occasion, I found it hard to stay a couple steps ahead of the players. I could barely keep up. "We set sail for Damandaros," they would say, and I'd be like, "Uh, okay. The voyage takes six days. When you arrive, a dragonborn officer in the service of the island's magistrate greets you. The officer wears a gold dragon mask and receives your tribute for the island's dragon overlord." Normally I'd ask the players what their characters do during the six-day voyage, and then describe the island of Damandaros as they approach, but not this time. That's when I knew I was *really* off my game.

LESSONS LEARNED

My lackluster DMing notwithstanding, I was reminded of something important. The thought came to me just before the three goliath criminals tried to commandeer the party's submersible, which, in hindsight, was nothing but a desperate attempt on my part to end the evening with some violence and invalidate the players' rather uncharacteristic act of mercy. And here's what I learned: Despite my less than stellar performance, the players had a great time. When the session ended, my players thanked me for the terrific game, to which I responded with silent surprise. I've

earned similar reactions before, usually after a gripping cliffhanger or bloody climactic battle against a major campaign villain. On this occasion, I felt like I'd underserved them, and yet they hardly seemed to notice. They had spent the last three-and-a-half hours arguing about the rights and wrongs of killing a trio of goliath criminals who posed no real threat to them, decided on various courses of action, received the good graces of a gold dragon overlord, and watched the goliaths throw away their lives in a failed attempt to win their freedom. To them, it was all very gratifying.

As long as my players have choices to make, engaging problems to solve, and moments where they feel like things are finally going their way, they can handle an evening without the funny accents, the first-person acting, the sudden reversals, and the clever parlor tricks. The goliath villains got their final comeuppance, the heroes found a powerful new ally, they've taken the campaign in a new direction, and I didn't pull the rug out from under them (as I occasionally do when things are going well). I couldn't have planned it better.

If your players care about what's happening in your campaign world, you don't always need to dazzle them. I've found the same thing to be true with many beloved TV shows: once I discover that I like the show's characters and the situations in which they find themselves, not every episode needs brilliant, Emmy-worthy performances for me to continue liking the show. Because I'm hooked, I don't need to be impressed week after week. The same is true, I suppose, with my campaign. One mediocre DMing effort on my part goes unnoticed because my players are fans of the campaign, and they feel empowered to take what they've been given and run with it. Kudos to them.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

WAXING GYGAXIAN

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Many moons ago, the dwarven clanlords of Gar Morra and the human barons of Bael Nerath crafted a hammer symbolizing their alliance, and the weapon was blessed by exarchs of Moradin and Erathis. It was then placed in a neutral stronghold called Harth Fantaro, where it remained until a cataclysm caused the citadel to sink into the ocean. Still, the hammer remained safe inside its extradimensional vault, watched over by the vault's astral giant architect . . . or so the story goes.

At the end of paragon tier, the Monday night heroes made good on a promise and agreed to help the Deeplantern Guild (deep sea explorers) retrieve the *Hammer of the Gods* from Harth Fantaro, thinking it might fortify the squabbling dwarven clanholds and human baronies against the oppressive Dragovar Empire. The party found its way into the extradimensional vault and were confounded by a dungeon of shifting rooms, each one holding a small dwarven rune on a plate of burnished gold, and each one guarded by a puzzle, trap, or guardian. Only by retrieving all fifteen runes could they obtain the hammer, and even then, I threw in a couple of "curve balls" to turn the traditional "artifact hunt" adventure on its head. First and foremost, years of isolation had driven the astral giant mad, and a recent incursion by githyanki finally caused him to snap and regard all interlopers as enemies of Erathis and Moradin. Consequently, the dungeon's immortal architect believed the heroes to be githyanki, and attacked them at every turn. Second, the *Hammer of the Gods* did not actually existthe heroes had to create it themselves using the

runes scattered throughout the dungeon, which have the one-time power to turn any magical or masterwork hammer into the artifact.

The dungeon itself was a series of fifteen rooms with portals linking them, but the portal destinations would shift constantly, making it difficult for heroes to map the dungeon and find their way back to the entrance chamber. It seemed very appropriate for a dungeon hidden in the Astral Sea.

I would argue (and have on several occasions) that being the editor of *Dungeon* magazine is the best job in the roleplaying game business. However, if someone told me I could make a career out of inventing and drawing dungeon maps, I might change my tune. I have a "thing" for D&D maps, you see.

Whereas normal people like to spend their Sundays watching football, catching a movie, visiting family, or surfing the Internet for porn, I would rather draw maps and work on my D&D campaign. Sadly, that isn't always possible. Case in point, I'm spending a Sunday afternoon writing this article. No offense, but I'd rather be designing an illithid stronghold, an archwizard's tomb, or a dragon's lair!

My earliest dungeon maps were inspired by the sprawling, Gygaxian complexes featured in early TSR products. Each level filled an entire sheet of graph paper and had the logic of a *Pokemon* episode, but all those meandering corridors and awkwardly shaped rooms spoke volumes about the madness of their architects. They were built to torment and confound intruders.

In the 1980s and 90s, dungeons evolved. We saw fewer labyrinthine complexes infested with bizarre menageries of monsters in favor of smaller dungeons, with arrangements of rooms and corridors that made internal sense while still proving deadly to unwanted interlopers. Dungeon designers began to think more logically, asking questions such as: Where do the monsters get their food? Where do they dispose of their garbage and go to the bathroom? What keeps the monsters from killing one another?

Today, dungeons have taken a back seat to story, to the extent that some adventures and campaigns do without them. It's true! The kid in me is saddened by the fact that D&D has, for many people (including myself), "evolved" beyond the simple joy of cracking open a long-lost dungeon and spending session after session plumbing its depths for treasure and defeating monsters and traps along the way. Byzantine dungeons have been forsaken in favor of event-driven scenarios and clever plots. There have been a few memorable exceptions, mind you. *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* was very much a campaign set in a dungeon, with a thick layer of dungeon politics just to make things more interesting. Before that, we had the *Night Below* and *Ruins of Undermountain* boxed sets, which also promised and delivered subterranean campaigns.

Now, before you think I'm a D&D puritan or an old-school dungeon-hugger, let it be known that I run a 4th Edition campaign that has shockingly few dungeons. Iomandra

is a world shattered into thousands of tiny islands, each one a potential adventure location with its own perils, and yet I can count on one hand the number of sprawling dungeons my Monday and Wednesday night groups have explored. Almost all of the action takes place on ships or aboveground. In my campaign, underground exploration is usually limited to sea caves, castle dungeons, and city sewers. Furthermore, such excursions rarely demand more than a session or two. To date, there have been only three elaborate dungeons that required considerable exploration timea yuan-ti prince's tomb located on the party's home island of Irindol (heroic tier), a sunken dwarven stronghold with an extradimensional vault (paragon tier), and a crashed flying citadel buried under a mile-thick glacier (epic tier).

Iomandra is a campaign about island nations at war. The prevailing nautical theme makes it hard to justify the inclusion of more than a few monstrous dungeons. For me, this focus been mostly a blessing, since it takes a lot of time and effort to create a sprawling dungeon complex, stock it, and find ways to keep the PCs engaged week after week. Tedious dungeons are like pools of thick mud; they can slow the campaign to a crawl and make the players forget they're supposed to be having fun.

Even though my campaign doesn't focus on dungeon exploration, I use dungeons as a way to defy player expectations. When the Monday group finally decided to retrieve the *Hammer of the Gods* from the sunken dwarven stronghold, they were not expecting to find themselves trapped in a sprawling extradimensional dungeon complex. They were surprised and delighted when, after eight or so rooms, they still hadn't found their prize. I think the exact words were, "OMG! We're in a dungeon!" The Wednesday group had a similar reaction recently, when their hunt for a pair of fugitives the nefarious Kharl Mystrum and Nemencia Xandros led them into the heart of a fallen citadel buried under ice. There's nothing like a dungeon that creeps up on your players and swallows their characters before they know it!

LESSONS LEARNED

It almost goes without saying that the best dungeons have strong ties to the themes and/or stories of your campaign, that whatever decisions the PCs make in the dungeon will not only determine the party's fate but also the inform the direction of the campaign going forward. That's better than the alternative: a dungeon that is merely a distraction, with no lasting impact on the campaign whatsoever.

The problem with good dungeons is that they aren't easy to make. Some people are masters at it; for others, it's a real chore. That's why we have downloadable dungeon-building software that lets us create sprawling (albeit unimaginative and repetitive) dungeon levels with a few mouse clicks. Even better, we have a Google search engine; all one needs to do is type in the words "dungeon maps" to see dozens of cleverly designed dungeon complexes ripe for plunder, including several that your players aren't likely to recognize.

Rather than belabor the obvious, let me do us all a service here. Thousands of people read this column every week, and I know some small percentage of you folks are dungeon builders extraordinaire. In the interest of giving us all more dungeons to choose from, I propose the following contest:

UNTIL THE NEXT ENCOUNTER!

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

NEVER SURRENDER

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Cornered by pit fiends, Oleander the halfling rogue (played by Peter Schaefer) decides to go down fighting rather than surrender. Agents of the Vost Miraj (the Dragovar Empire's spy network) recover Oleander's corpse, raise him from the dead, and trap him inside a giant hollow cannonball aboard a docked Dragovar warship. Zarkhrysa, the Vost Miraj leader, wants to fold Oleander's spy network into hers, and so she offers him a deal. In exchange for his spy network, she'll release Oleander from captivity and help the PCs avoid future entanglements with the Dragovar Empire, which currently views them as terrorists and traitors. Oleander isn't ready to relinquish control of his guild, but he doesn't let on. Left alone to consider Zarkhrysa's "generous offer," he uses one of the abilities of his epic destiny (Thief of Legend) to "steal" his giant cannonball prison, effectively teleporting it away. Once freed from captivity, he sneaks off the warship and runs naked through the naval district of Io'calioth. Oh, did I fail to mention that the Vost Miraj took all of his stuff?

When the going gets tough, most player characters would rather die than surrender, and that's a pity. The classic jailbreak scenario is a staple of fiction (it happens all the time in James Bond movies), but it's tough to pull off in a D&D campaign. You can't exactly blame the players for making it difficult, either: To surrender means to place your character's destiny and magic items firmly in the hands of the Dungeon Master, and speaking frankly, not every DM is accustomed to dealing with that situation when it arises.

A Dungeon Master who designs an encounter specifically to capture the PCs is, in my opinion, wasting time. Players know when the DM is angling to subdue their characters, and they will exhaust every resource and exploit every rule to ensure an altogether different outcome. I never build encounters designed to paint players into a corner where their only option is surrender. Let's face it as long as characters have the option to go down fighting, surrender always seems like the less heroic choice. More players would rather shout "Never surrender!" than "Never say die!" In light of this reality, I try to create challenging encounters that, based on number and level of the enemies, might be more than the characters can handle. (I say *might* because it's hard to predict how clever tactics and good dice rolls will affect the outcome. I've seen a lucky run of critical hits turn a battle on its head in a matter of rounds.) My hope is that, over time, I can change the party's default motto from "Never surrender!" to "Live to fight another day!" But I still have a long way to go before surrender becomes anything but a last resort.

Neither my Monday night group nor my Wednesday night group has ever surrendered in its entirety. Both groups have experienced TPKs, and I've managed to capture as many as three PCs at once in the Monday game (recently, at epic tier) and four PCs at once in the Wednesday game (way back in the middle of the heroic tier). I occasionally capture a stray PC, but almost always because the PC was knocked unconscious or killed first. That doesn't count as "surrendering" in my book. Still, it does happen once in a blue moon. Two weeks ago, Nick DiPetrillo's epic-level warforged artificer surrendered to Dragovar authorities when he didn't have any obvious means of escape. But then, most of the warforged's magic items are built into his body and not easily removed. In other words, the character had very little to lose by surrendering. Nick's two previous characters had considerably more gear to lose, and they would sooner die than be taken prisoner (and perish they did).

It takes a great player to view surrender as an opportunity for fun instead of a punishment for failure, and it takes a great DM to realize that surrender can be the catalyst for some awesome heroics and memorable campaign moments. If you can get a player character to surrender, you've achieved something quite special: You've gotten a player to place his or her trust in your storytelling skill and temporarily relinquish control of his or her character's fate. The absolute worst response is to brutally punish the player for that decision and make him or her regret letting the character be taken alive. Before you can expect characters to surrender, you have to convince your players that surrendering isn't a fate worse than death no easy feat, but I think I'm making some headway convincing my players that surrendering has certain advantages. The trick is to convince them that the following things are true:

SURRENDER DOESN'T MEAN THE CAMPAIGN'S OVER.

If your players know in their hearts that you won't use a character's surrender as a way to punish "bad play" but as an opportunity for the character to reverse his or her misfortune in some fantastic way, they won't regard surrender as the end of their characters' adventuring careers. Even if they don't like to admit it, D&D players understand that fictional heroes are supposed to have ups and downs. Nothing is more heroic than watching a character overcome a great disadvantage, especially when he or she must rely on his wits and skills instead of a plethora of all-purpose magic items. Depending on the situation, you might need to take steps to expedite the character's escape by fabricating a serendipitous occurrence (such as a careless guard leaving a prison key within easy reach) or by allowing NPCs or even the gods to intervene on the heroes' behalf. Bad things happen to PCs all the time, so it's often a pleasant surprise to see something go the party's way by sheer DM fiat. I tend to adopt this helpful mentality whenever the characters are split up and I want to reunite them as quickly as possible.

ITEMS LOST SHOULD BE REGAINED EVENTUALLY.

For many players, nothing sucks more than losing hard-won loot, particularly magic items that add bonuses to defenses and attack rolls. If a PC surrenders, I make it a point to reunite the character with his loot (or treasure of comparable value) at the earliest, most plausible moment, even if it means helping them escape. When Jeremy Crawford's human wizard was captured and hauled off to the island prison of Zardkarath, he was stripped of his gear. Well into the voyage, a sympathetic NPC lurking aboard the prison ship (actually Bruce Cordell's retired character, Melech) helped Jeremy's wizard break free and showed him where his magical gear was stored. Once he was reunited with his gear, the wizard was able to take care of himself and teleport off the ship.

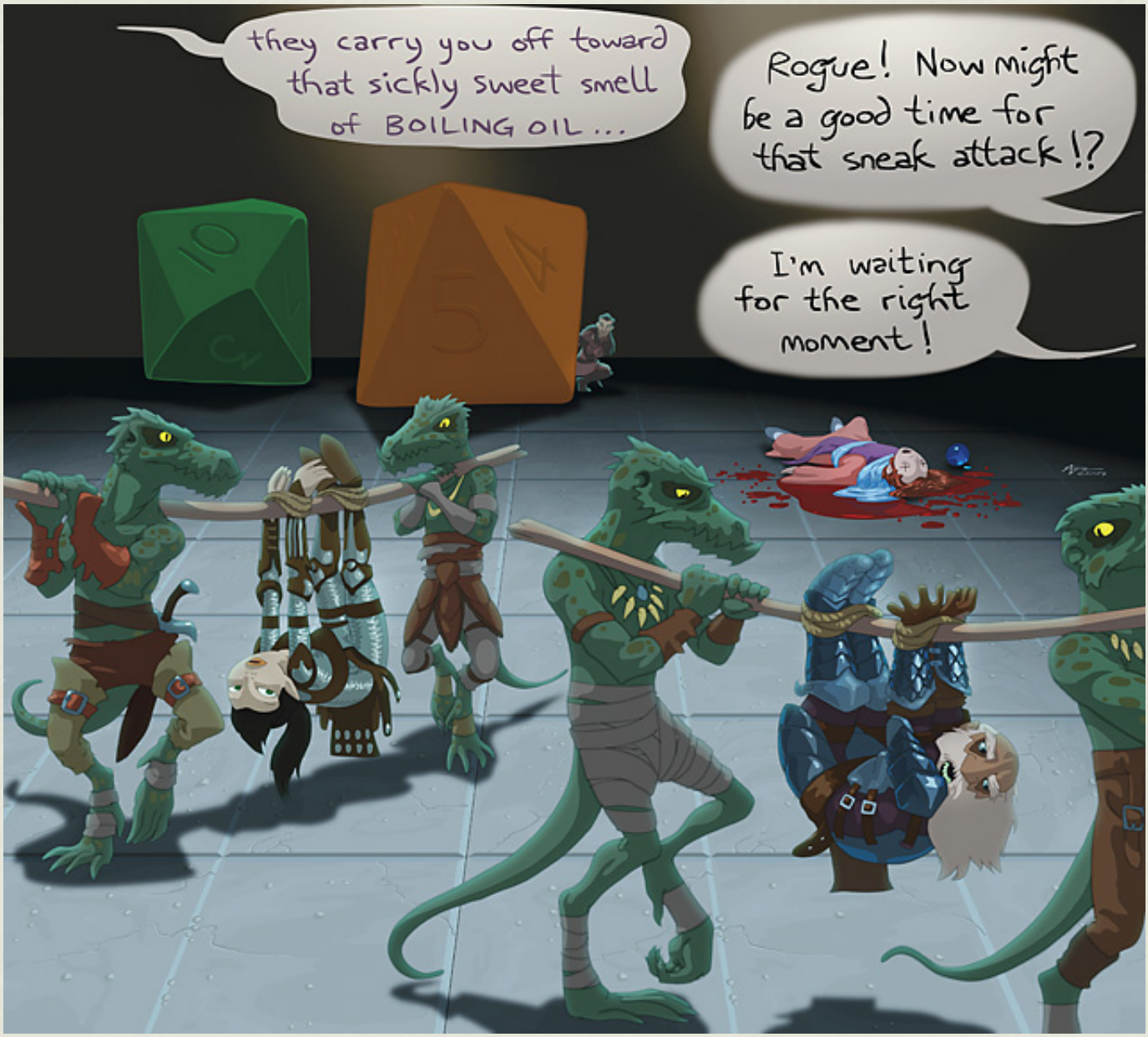
MAGIC ITEMS AREN'T ALL THAT IMPORTANT.

Would it ruin my campaign to deprive the heroes of every magic item in their possession? Surely not! Putting aside the fact that D&D characters are much more than the sum of their magic items, I like to think that I'm a fair and fun-loving DM, and naturally I would balance the campaign accordingly. There are a handful of magic items that are actually fun to use because they inspire creativity (*hats of disguise*, for example), but most items don't define a character in the ways that truly matter. Peter Schaefer's epic-level halfling rogue, who escaped captivity two sessions ago, has been running around without gear (and scant little clothing) ever since. Although there's a lot of cool stuff Peter would like to get back eventually, he's not exactly on death's door. Oleander's recent misadventures have forced the character to rely more on his skills and his colleagues and less on magic items. It's been an entertaining couple of weeks, not just for Peter but for everyone else at the game table, and Oleander has a new quest: get his stuff back!

CAPTURE SHOULD COME WITH A REWARD.

Have a captured character learn something important while in captivity. Let the character encounter a potential ally. Give the character a chance to interact with his captors in a manner not normally possible. These "rewards" pay off in terms of story and character development. When Baharoosh, Stan's dragonborn rogue, was

captured following a botched assault on a Dragovar stronghold, he was delivered to the Vost Miraj, handed a quest, and released. In effect, the Vost Miraj gave him a choice: *Complete this quest for us, or we'll hunt you down and kill you*. In their arrogance, the Vost Miraj made the classic blunder of thinking they could control the hero through fear. Meanwhile, while in captivity, Baharoosh discovered that the Vost Miraj was working closely with an imperial vizier named Sezerivian to eliminate one of his political rivals. This kind of information wouldn't normally find its way into the party's hands, but Baharoosh's capture unearthed a campaign secret that resourceful PCs might exploit in the future. When all's said and done, I've *rewarded* Baharoosh for being captured, not punished him.


they carry you off toward that sickly sweet smell of BOILING OIL...
Rogue! Now might be a good time for that sneak attack!?
I'm waiting for the right moment!

LESSONS LEARNED

As mentioned earlier, I don't recommend building encounters specifically designed to capture the PCs. It's better to let players come to the conclusion that surrender is a viable option, if not the most desirable outcome. I can take steps to make the surrender option more palatable, including making my villains less interested in

murdering the heroes and more interested in taking them alive, or throwing wave after wave of threats at them until battle fatigue sets in. However, such approaches are rarely successful. Here are two other approaches I've tried, with mixed results:

Divide and Conquer: If a player isolates his or her character from the rest of the party, that character suddenly loses access to a lot of party resources (buff spells, healing, beneficial auras, and whatnot) and becomes measurably weaker. Personally, I'm ruthless when it comes to punishing players who split the party. (Just ask Wil Wheaton!) My bad guys focus their attacks on the isolated character and attempt to cut off all means of escape by closing doors, blocking line of sight to other party members, and using powers that hinder movement or reduce the number of actions the character can take on his or her turn. Once the character is subdued, I can try to bully the other heroes into surrendering by threatening violence against the captured character. More often than not, the remaining players write off the captured character and continue fighting for their lives, but the idea of surrendering is at least discussed.

Player Absence: If a player is absent and his or her character is "in play," I believe it's within my power as DM to use that character as a plot device and have the character surrender in the face of insurmountable odds (if for no other reason than to keep the character alive until the player returns). In a recent example from the Monday campaign, Matt Sernett was absent for one session, and his human fighter was captured and hauled off to a jailhouse for his alleged involvement in criminal activities (actually, there was nothing "alleged" about it). The other PCs were in no position to do anything, having already fled the scene, so it wasn't a stretch to say Matt's character had simply surrendered. One week later, Matt was back, and a sympathetic NPC helped Bartho escape captivity, which led to a brief yet harrowing wagon chase through the streets of Io'calioth (the Dragovar capital) and ended with Bartho flinging himself into the harbor, activating his seahorse *figurine of wondrous power*, and swimming away.

Under normal circumstances, the option to surrender should be a player choice, and some players will never surrender regardless of the assurances you make that their characters won't be screwed or forever deprived of their hard-earned loot. For some players, 'tis better to die with sword swinging than to give up one's blade to an enemy. *So be it.* That doesn't prevent you from turning a TPK into a future jailbreak scenario. Which reminds me: At some point, I'd like to talk about nigh invincible epic-level heroes and the challenges of taking down an epic-level party. Sounds like a worthy topic for a future installment.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

CUTS AND SPLINTERS

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The epic-level heroes are wanted for crimes against the Dragovar Empire. They stand accused of crashing a flying citadel into the capital city, killing the imperial regent, impersonating imperial officials, assaulting a military stronghold, killing a witness under military protection and stealing her corpse, slaughtering dozens of Dragovar soldiers, and conspiracy to overthrow the government. Now, in all fairness, a pair of evil NPCs named Kharl and Nemencia crashed the citadel into Io'calioth; our "heroes" simply decided to do nothing about it.

Cornered in a run-down theater and confronted with the real possibility of a TPK, the heroes summon an efreet who owes them a favor, and he teleports them to a remote island where they can take a much needed extended rest. However, they're forced to leave their human psion ("Kyle Rolark," played by Chris Dupuis) behind. Kyle had already met his end at the hands of two pit fiends, which paved the way for his ghost to manifest. Since then, ghost-Kyle has been hijacking bodies and using them as hosts (talk about fun!), and while possessing one such host he managed to accidentally teleport himself out of sight and out of range of his criminal companions moments before the efreet teleported them away. Since then, ghost-Kyle has been trying to reunite with the other PCs, but they're more than half a world away. There's no telling when and if they'll see Kyle again.

My players know better than to split the party, and yet it happens with alarming frequencyand not just in the Monday night game. I could charge my Wednesday night group with the same crime, and that group has more repeat offenders! Let me tell you a brief, sad little story about Garrot the fighter, played expertly (some might say incompetently) by Mat Smith. Two sessions ago, the party was fighting three different encounters at once when Garrot decided to leap onto an undead beholder and ride it around. (You think he would've learned his lesson after the Catapult incident, but no.) The death tyrant reacted by floating away, taking Garrot with it, and drifting into the middle of a vast glacial chasm filled with white dragons. (Yep, you read that right.) Last week, Garrot's friends had the option of coming to his rescue or taking sides in another fight between two mobs of NPCs. Well, long story short, Garrot was left to his own devices, fell off the beholder, took a pile of damage as he slammed into the jagged floor of the chasm some 200 feet below, and then was flash-frozen and eaten by the dragons.

But I depress.

In my 3rd Edition campaign, whenever the party splits, I would deal with each party "splinter" separately, making one group wait while the other group's current misadventure played out. Then, at an appropriately dramatic or tense moment, I would shift my attention to the waiting group for a while until an opportunity came to put them on hold and return to the first group. It has the same effect as *cut scenes* in movies—a simple trick that allows the audience to follow two or more narratives that unfold simultaneously in different locations. By the end of the session, every player felt like they'd been given equal time, albeit the equivalent of a half session's worth of attention. Invariably what happens is players become disinterested when the spotlight's no longer on them; they start texting friends or decide now's the time to strike up a mildly distracting side conversation. You would think that these bouts of inactivity would urge them not to split the party in the future, but no. My players never really learned that lesson. Most of them are in my 4th Edition campaign, and splitting the party is what Chris Champagne, one of my newer players, would call "a clear and present danger" every time they sit down to play.

When the party splits, a DM needs to be prepared to jump back and forth between the various fragments until an opportunity to reunite the PCs rears its beautiful head. However, these days I tend to use the "back-and-forth" approach only as a last resort. I've found another approach I like better, and it's effective even when one or more of

the splinter groups aren't in combat.

Here's how it works: Regardless of the number of splintered-off party members, everyone rolls initiative, and I use the initiative order to govern the flow of the session. Sounds simple, and it is.

To take an example from this past Monday night, ghost-Kyle spent the majority of the session in spiritual possession of Thorbalt Mithralstar, dwarven son of Sea King Mithralstar, using the dwarf's good name and influence to finagle passage on a ship. The rest of the party spent the same session trying to stay one step ahead of their Dragovar pursuers while dealing with some infernal beasts they accidentally pulled through a tapestry depicting the Nine Hells (it's a long story fraught with far-reaching consequences). Regardless of ghost-Kyle's separation from his friends, everyone was in initiative order for the entire night, and every time we came to ghost-Kyle's turn, the action would suddenly shift to Thorbalt Mithralstar in Io'calioth. Since he wasn't in combat, ghost-Kyle's turn would sometimes entail more than a single round of actions and allow for such things as a short conversation with a dwarf NPC (not in Dwarven, because—*quelle surprise*—Kyle doesn't speak the language), or a botched attempt to lose a pair of human handlers assigned to follow Mithralstar and keep him out of trouble. However, his turn was not markedly longer than anyone else's because, as a DM, I'm trained to think of initiative as a way to keep the action moving from one player to the next.

In a recent Wednesday night game, Xanthum the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould) blasted himself onto another plane when he accidentally activated his extradimensional cloak inside a *portable hole*, and he spent the better part of a session trapped in the Astral dominion of a Greyhawk deity (Istus) and isolated from the rest of the party. However, I kept Xanthum in the initiative order and circled back to him every time his turn came up. Curt was kept in the game, but he wasn't given any more attention than any other party member, which kept the other players from drifting off when Curt's turn came around.

LESSONS LEARNED

Relying on the initiative count to pace the session has a couple advantages over the more traditional approach of dealing with one party splinter at a time:

- The initiative count gives you the feeling of "cut scenes" but lets players know when their turns are coming up. It makes it harder for players to ignore the part of the session that doesn't directly involve them.
- The initiative count removes the burden of having to guarantee every player equal play time and lets the DM focus on the fun stuff: listening, reacting to the players, and improvising.

Well, as they say in television, that's a wrap for this week. I'm off to peruse a dazzling array of dungeons submitted as part of the Dungeon Map contest. Thanks to everyone who submitted an entry. Oh, and if you have an idea or topic for a future DM Experience article, leave a quick comment.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

ACERERAK'S APPRENTICE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The only thing more fun than creating a dungeon is destroying one, which is a rare opportunity that I never pass up. It's like watching a villain's hideout blow up at the end of a Bond film. For the past few weeks, the Wednesday night group has been exploring a crashed flying citadel a dungeon buried under a mile of glacial ice. The citadel crashed long ago on an arctic island ruled by the white dragon Calderax. To make a long story short, the heroes offended the dragon by slaying one of her brood and took refuge behind hundreds of feet of 10-foot-wide corridors, thinking the colossal dragon wouldn't be able to reach them. Thus, the players were surprised when I started erasing large sections of the battle map and widening all of the corridors as Calderax plowed through the crumbled labyrinth, breaking up narrow passages with her claws and great bulk. The map transformed before the players' wide eyes, and with each chamber the dragon burst into, it became increasingly evident that no corner of the dungeon was safe. And so the PCs withdrew into an extradimensional space created with an *exodus knife* and let the dungeon bear the brunt of the dragon's wrath.

Acererak is a powerful archwizard who transformed into a demilich, and in this bodiless form he dwells in the depths of his most terrible creation, the Tomb of Horrors, waiting for unwary adventurers to stumble upon his remains so that he can feed on their souls. In short, he isn't a very nice guy. I'm resurrecting him here not because he appears in my campaign (he doesn't) but because this week we're talking about DUNGEONS. As evidenced by last Wednesday's game, I'm the sort of DM who breaks his dungeons, much like some children break their toys, so I'm always on the lookout for awesome new ones.

Acererak's trap-ridden tomb ranks as one of the most iconic dungeons in D&D lore. It has claimed the lives of more adventurers than any other dungeon, and perhaps as many as all the other classic dungeons put together. This week, I'm breaking format to showcase the winning entries from our recent **Best Dungeon contest**, but which mad architect will win the dubious honor of being Acererak's apprentice? I'll let this week's poll answer that question. As for me, I'm going to leave the voting to the experts and instead discuss what I find appealing about each of these labyrinths; dungeons should be explored, after all. Thanks to everyone who submitted an entry!

Dungeon of the Sleeping Dragon

By Kirk Wiebe, Lincoln NE

Kirk writes: An ancient eladrin known only as Starfire built a dungeon to conceal his most prized treasure: a sleeping dragon. As mysterious as he was brilliant, Starfire created a series of bridges and walkways that formed an underground dungeon with parts of it "floating" over the darkness below. Secretly, the floating rooms rest on the back of the dragon. Best be careful not to wake it!

Memorable dungeons, like memorable NPCs, have secrets. Starfire's dungeon has one of the coolest secrets I've seen in a long time: part of it was built on top of a sleeping dragon. The fact that the dragon is the dungeon's "treasure" is another nice touch, and far more interesting than a sarcophagus full of gold pieces! Add a few oddly shaped rooms and some cross-hatching around the walls, and we end up with a dungeon that really stands out.

Tomb of the Brothers

By Ian Stewart, Boston MA

Ian writes: Claresta Moonfall, "Flint" MacGuintly, and Bertrum McHammerSlammer were adventurers renowned for their accomplishments and known by the self-given moniker: the Brothers of the Elemental Chaos. They weren't from the Elemental Chaos. They weren't even brothers! They weren't even the same race or gender. Their quirks and eccentricities are reflected in their tomb, which was never intended to serve as their final resting place. They filled it with traps and monsters, placed power weapons in their individual crypts as bait, and dared other adventurers to plunder what they'd left behind. Each challenge was put there to instill in any who entered the tomb the three things the Brothers believed made a hero above all else: strength of body, cleverness of mind, and fearlessness in the face of death. And if you pressed Bertram McHammerSlammer, he'd tell you there was a "secret" reason why they created the tomb: it was really FUN!

The Brothers of the Elemental Chaos managed to capture three important characteristics of Gygaxian dungeon design: (1) asymmetry, (2) oddly shaped rooms, and (3) a layout that defies conventional logic. Characters can easily become lost in the tangle of corridors and chambers, and the lack of symmetry only adds to their unease. All three traits testify to the architects' madness and make players afraid for their characters' lives, for this sort of dungeon gives double meaning to the phrase "dead ends." And yet the map's conformity to the grid makes it easy for DMs to replicate—a virtue not to be underappreciated!

The Fortress of Despair

By Rob Waluchow, Hamilton ON

Rob writes: The infamous Fortress of Despair was constructed by the mad lich Xygarien. In order to protect the only means of his true destruction, the paranoid wizard designed this forlorn dungeon to confuse, confound, and horribly maim any would-be heroes.

It's amazing what you can do with digital tools these days! This beautifully rendered map DARES me to throw adventurers into it! It also has a particular quality important to truly Gygaxian dungeons: a complex arrangement of rooms and corridors that doesn't relegate trespassers to move in one particular direction. Many dungeons bore interlopers because they don't offer even the most rudimentary of choices—which direction to go? The Fortress of Despair has no such flaw. (Also, brownie points for the carnival title font, which evoked memories of 1st Edition.)

Maiden of the Blighted Steppes

By Sersa Victory, Joliet IL

Sersa writes: Decades ago, a clan of refugee medusas petrified a stargazing titan queen and chiseled her body into the likeness of their beautiful foremother, Euryale, in an attempt to seduce a living comet to come to the planet and wipe out their former masters. The catacombs beneath the 20-story "maiden" once served as living quarters for the medusas, a fane for their astrological rituals, a gallery for their dying culture's heirlooms, and a shelter from the cataclysm they sought to bring upon the world. However, the wayward clan has disappeared, leaving their wealth and secrets vulnerable to those who would seek to claim it.

First of all, what an amazing story! I love the idea of a dungeon built by an apocalyptic cult of medusas with a petrified titan queen as its "centerpiece." The incorporation of astrological symbols into the dungeon itself helps reinforce the dungeon's theme and explains that weird comet-shaped room to the south. I found myself entranced by the map's many curiosities little doodles and flourishes that make me want to roll up a character and explore the dungeon the way it was meant to be explored!

Kaladish the Dwarven Stronghold

By Jamie Rickard, Kingston ON

Jamie writes: Kaladish was the grand stronghold of the dwarven High King Kilric Stonehammer, the last of the dwarven high kings. Stonehammer wanted Kaladish to bring the dwarven clans of Volshar together and end the petty feuding between them. The unification held for nearly a decade after the end of the first Dark War but final broke apart following the high king's death. Several of the clans kept Kaladish as their home, but in the hundred years since the end of the war, all contact with Kaladish was lost and no expeditions sent to Kaladish returned. Kaladish faded into legend, its location forgotten.

Kaladish isn't a Gygaxian dungeon *per se*, but one must appreciate its scale and ingenuity. Huge hexagonal compounds, each one capable of harboring an entire clan of dwarves, encircle a multi-leveled stronghold that features recurring geometric shapes and chambers that are exceptional in their simplicity, as befits dwarf architecture. As I kept zooming in, I was struck by the dwarven propensity for

defensive fortifications. Woe to any goblin army trapped in Kaladish's corridors! The only thing missing is the grid.

Colossal Dragon Carcass

By John Prenot, Rockford IL

"DMJohnny" writes: The carcass of this colossal black dragon was made into a lair by a young black dragon and his kobold minions. This young dragon, a distant relative of this colossal dragon, was searching for the dead dragon's hoard when it discovered the remains and decided to make a lair within. The passages are choked with vines and roots, and the kobolds have learned to bungee jump and attack with the vines.

You had me at bungee jumping kobolds.

LESSONS LEARNED

By analyzing the things I like about these winning dungeons, I find it easier to talk about the shortcomings of many other dungeons I've seen (and created!) over the years. Here are the things I tell would-be *Dungeon* magazine contributors to avoid whenever possible, like the *sphere of annihilation* that greets visitors to the Tomb of Horrors:

Dungeons that offer only one route from beginning to end are dull. Players like to make decisions, and even simple decisions such as whether to go right or left can be fun and potentially rewarding.

Dungeons that rely too heavily on symmetry are dull. Perfectly symmetrical dungeons lack surprise and character, although partially symmetrical dungeons are OK because a sudden break in symmetry can itself be surprising.

Dungeons that DMs can't easily replicate on graph paper or redraw on a battle map are annoying. The best dungeons torture the players, not the DM, so think twice about including a nine-sided room when an octagon will do.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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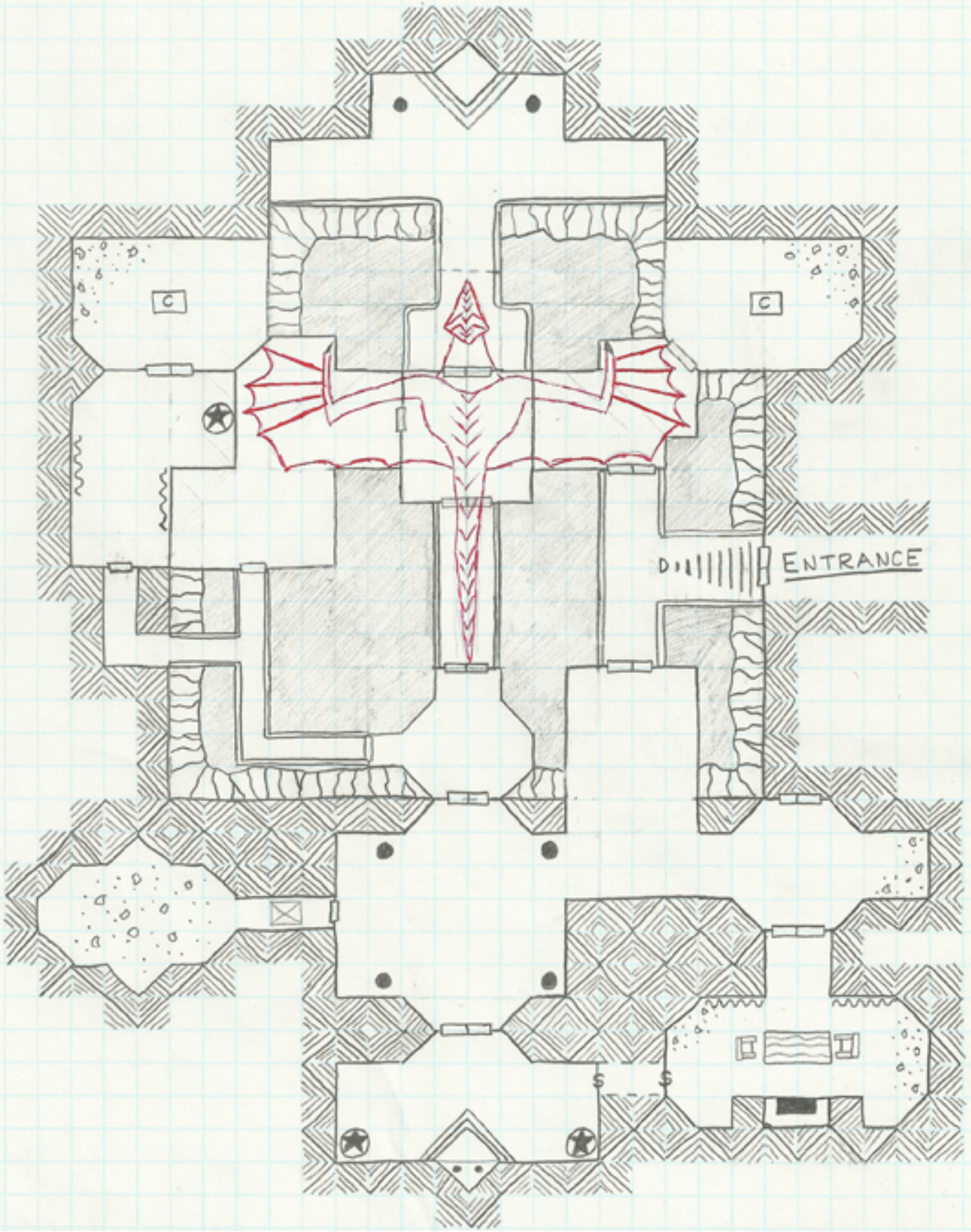
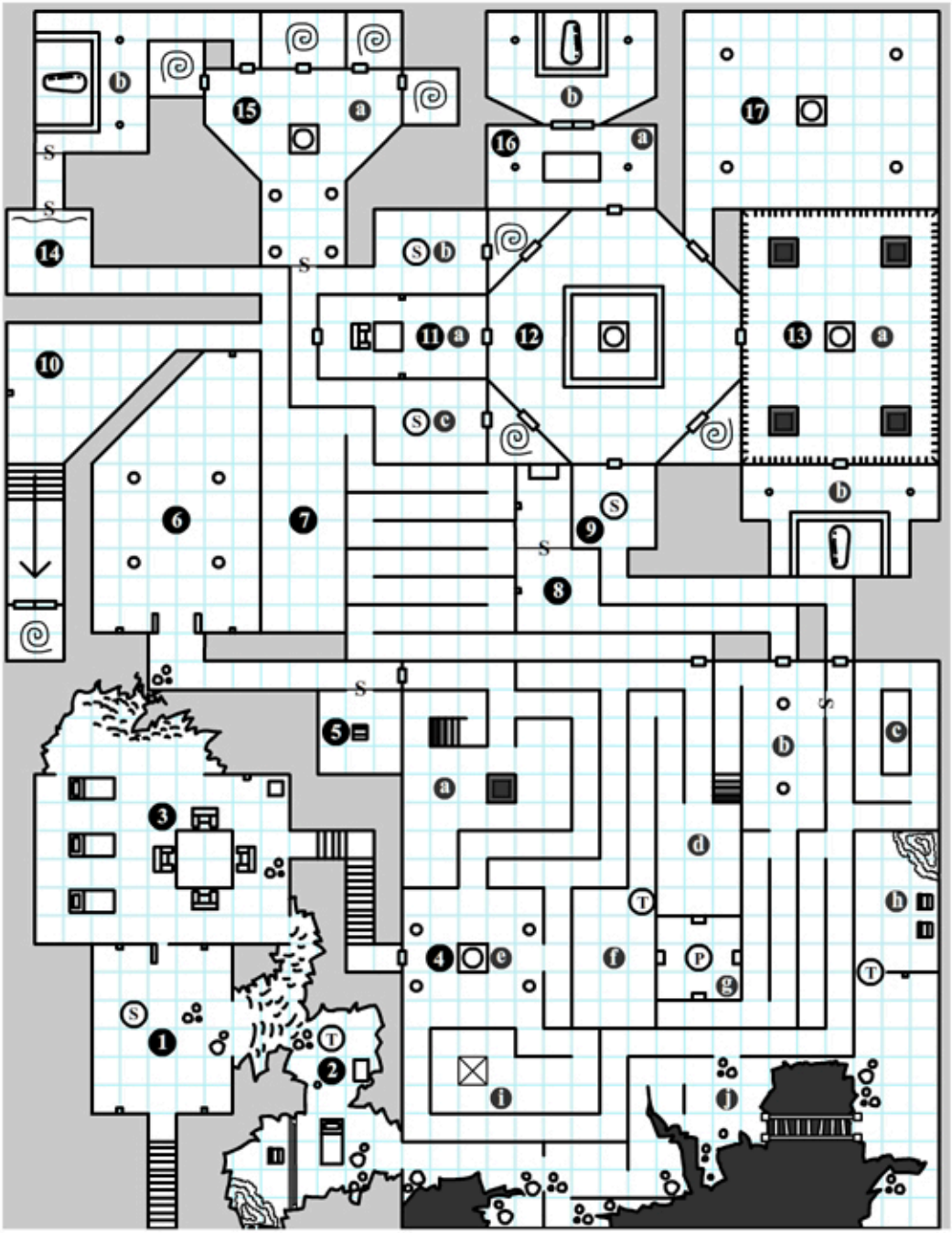
FEATURED ARTICLE

Dungeon of the Sleeping Dragon

By Kirk Wiebe, Lincoln NE

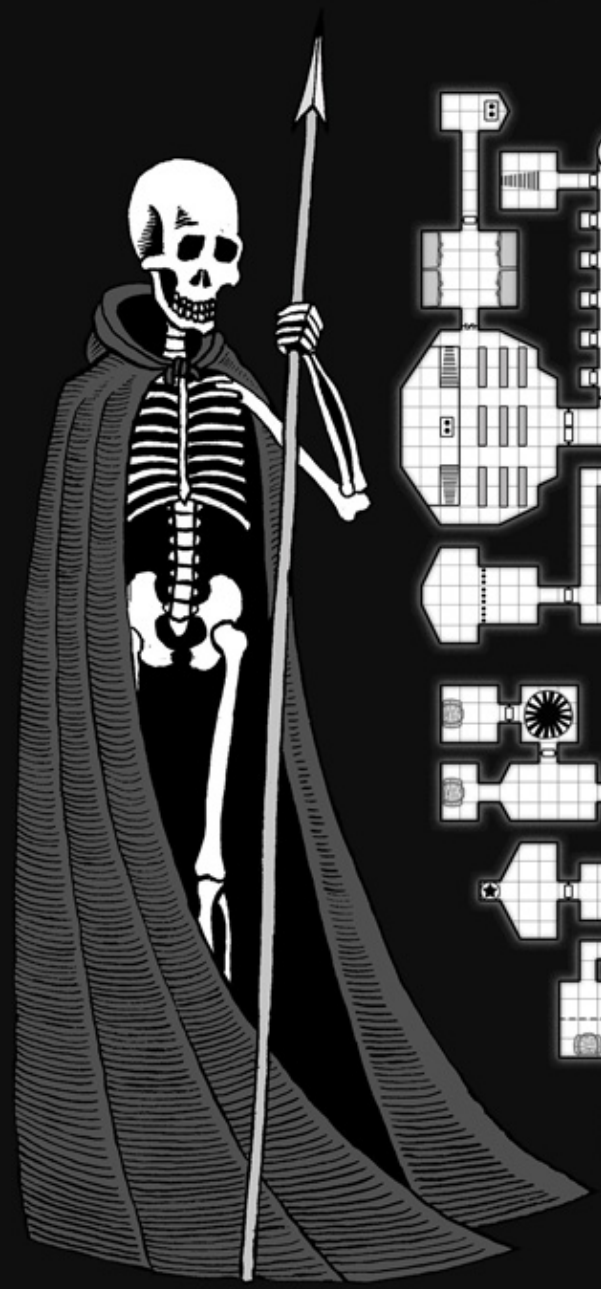


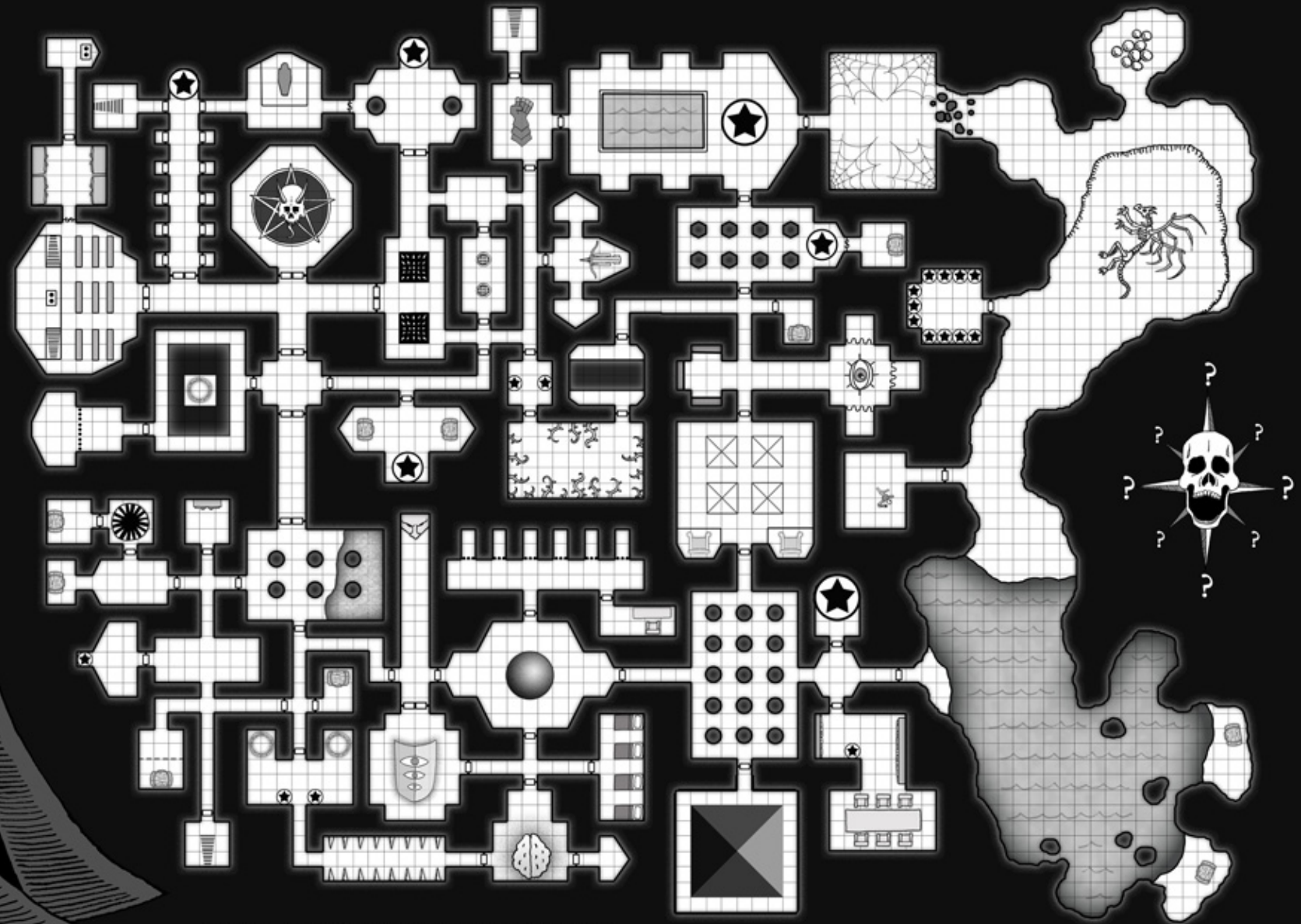


The Tomb Of The Brothers Of The Elemental Chaos

1. This room is empty though clearly has been taken over by an outside force. The walls have been dug into, the ancient traps have been disabled and one of the statues has been smashed.
2. This room holds the leader of some Goblins who have taken residence in the Tomb. He can reveal that the dungeon was too hard to expand into any further, highlighting specificly dangerous sections. There is treasure hidden behind a bookshelf, with books on it way too smart for this Goblin.
3. This room holds more Goblin bandits and a dug out section of the wall, which can br broken through to take the heroes into the dungeon.
4. This enormous room holds in it a Labyrinth guarded by many monsters, including a Minotaur. There are four doors leading out. Three lead to a section of the dungeon with nothing in it but more monsters and traps. None of the rooms within should hold any fights that are too tough.
   - a. This room holds monsters, an open pit and an undergroud tunnel leading to room 4b.
   - b. This room holds monsters, columns, a wrong doorway and an underground tunnel leading to room 4a.
   - c. This room holds a weapon rack at it's center.
   - d. The elusive "empty room."
   - e. This entrance is the only lit room in the Labyrinth.
   - f. This room contains monsters and traps.
   - g. This room contains four one way doors and a portal that wrongly opened doors send heroes back to.
   - h. This room is where the roving Minotaur's keeps treasure guarded by a trap.
   - i. This rooms contains a covered pit filled with snakes.
   - j. This room contains monsters, a large chasm, rubble and a bridge. It has been destroyed by the Goblins attempts to expand into the Labyrinth.
5. This secret room contails a treasure chest with hints on how to defeat a puzzle later on in the Tomb.
6. This room is a dead end with two open doors that lock behind anyone who enters. Solving a puzzle will open them.
7. This room contains three fake guardians that falsely lead the heroes to believe they are on the right path.
8. This room is a dead end hiding a secret room that holds a shrine, which heals all who enter.
9. This room contains a statue and leads into the main area of the Tomb.
10. This room falsely give the impression that the heroes are on their way to the tomb. However, the stairs leading down turn into a slide that sends them into a portal, teleporting the heroes to room 4g.
11. This path is meant to test the heroes cleverness of mind.
    - a. This room contains the Warforged Inf, and leads towards "Flint" MacGuintly's tomb. Inf is there to present a riddle, and the heroes cannot pass until they solve it.
    - b. This room contains a statue and a doorway leading to a portal that automatically returnsthe heroes to the room 4g. The statue contains hints to help find the secret door.
    - c. This room also contains a statue and a doorway leading to a portal that automatically returnsthe heroes to the room 4g. The statue contains hints to help find the secret door.
12. This room contains a large brazier and eight doorways three of which lead to portals that automatically transport the heroes to room 4g. The doorway leading to rooms 11, 16 and 13 take the heroes to the tombs of "Flint" MacGuintly, Claresta Moonfall and Bertram McHammerSlammer respectively. The doorway leading to room 17 must be opened specially. Each sarcophogus in each tomb has an ornate jewel on it, which if plucked off is revealed to be a doorknob. If all three are used to replace the knobs on the portal doors within room 12 and turned simultaniously the doorway to room 17 will open.
13. This path is meant to test the heroes strength of body.
    - a. This room contains spiked walls, four pits with spikes and a large brazier. In it the Warforged Rime puts the hereos through various tests of their strenth followed by a battle with the Warforged himself.
    - b. The Tomb of Bertram MacHammerSlammer contains two small braziers and a sarcophogus. Atop the sarcophogus is a unique and powerful magical weapon, and stuck in it's side is a what appears to be a large gem, but which is really a doorknob.
14. This room contains a large talking tapestry which mock the heroes for taking the wrong path. It hides a secret door which enters into the Tomb of "Flint" CaGuintly who sppreciates cleverness and wanted a secret entrance into his tomb.
15. This path is meant to test the heroes cleverness of mind.
    - a. This room contains four columns a large brazier and five doors, which if wrongly chosen, will bring the heroes to room 4g. There is also a puzzle to help the heroes choose the right door.
    - b. The Tomb of "Flint" MacGuintly contains two small braziers and a sarcophogus. Atop the sarcophogus is a unique and powerful magical weapon, and stuck in it's side is a what appears to be a large gem, but which is really a doorknob.
16. This path is meant to test that the heroes are unafraid of death.
    - a. This room contains two small braziers a table and the Warforged Flux. Flux askes the heroes to flip coins. He tells them if the wrong side lands facing up they will die. This is a lie and what is important is that they fearlessly and flip the coin.
    - b. The Tomb of Claresta Moonfall contains two small braziers and a sarcophogus. Atop the sarcophogus is a unique and powerful magical weapon, and stuck in it's side is a what appears to be a large gem, but which is really a doorknob.
17. If they reach it this room, the three Warforged guardians will be waiting for the heroes here. Here the guardians will confirm that the hereos are destined for greatness and send them on their first adventure to help defend the land.

THE FORTRESS OF DESPAIR





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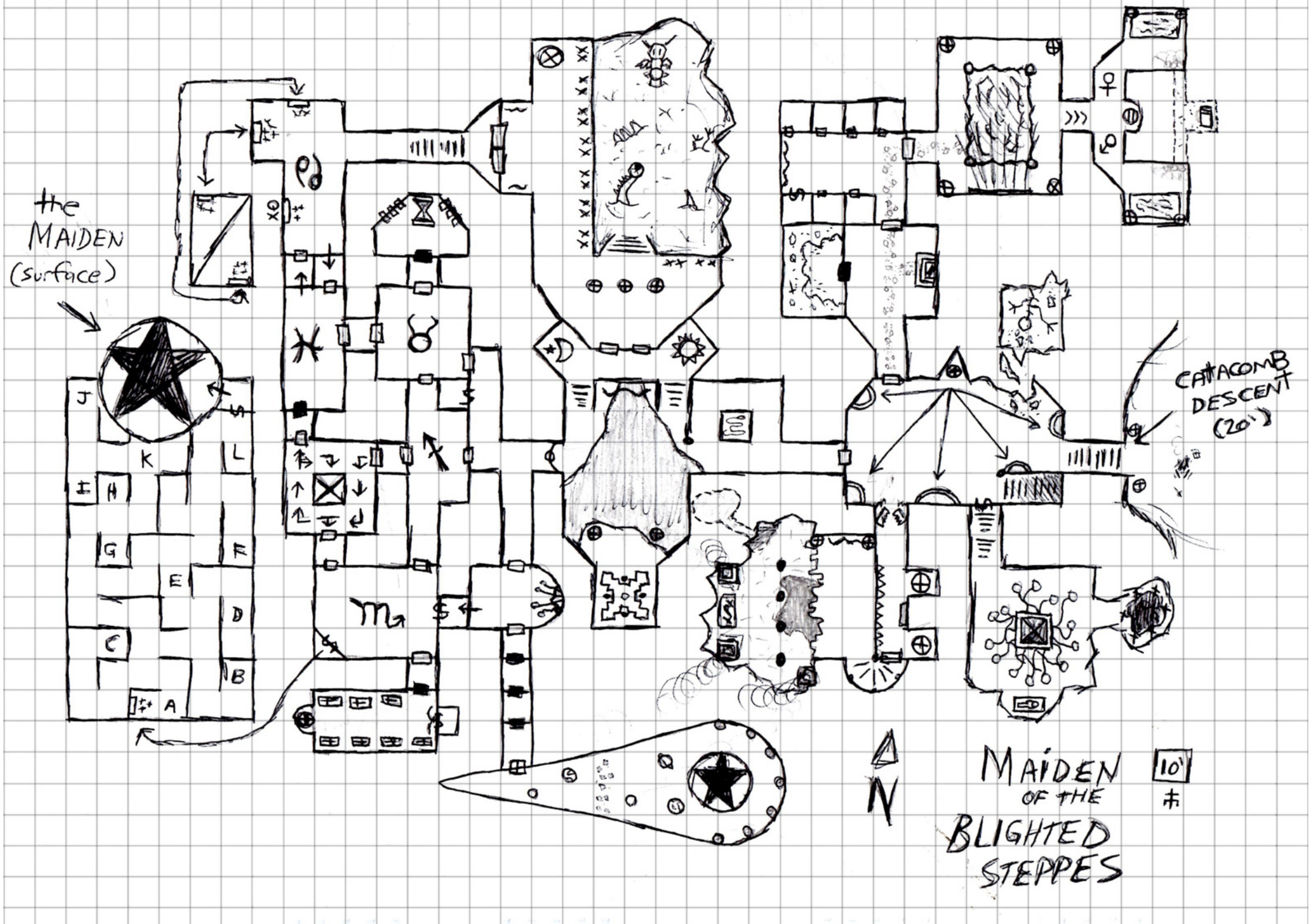
the MAIDEN (surface)
CATACOMB DESCENT (20')
J
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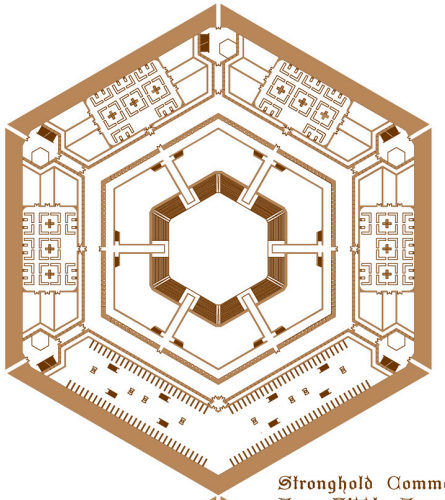
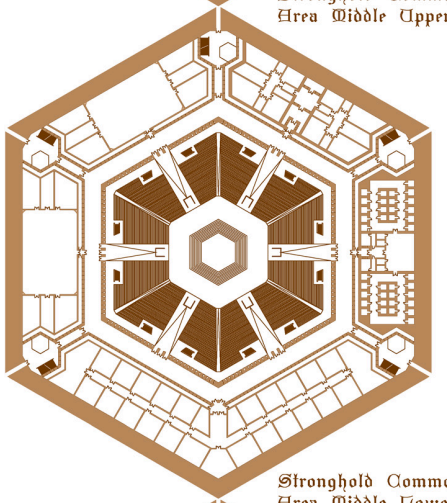
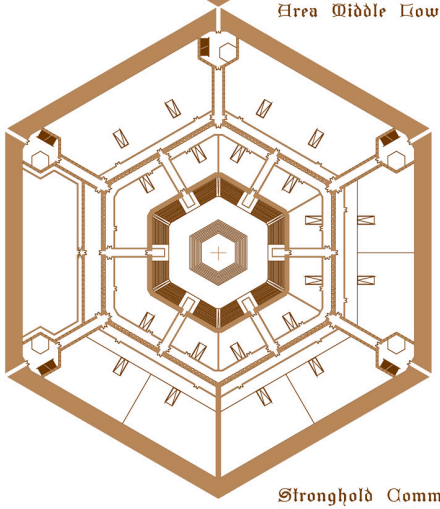
MAIDEN OF THE BLIGHTED STEPPES
10'



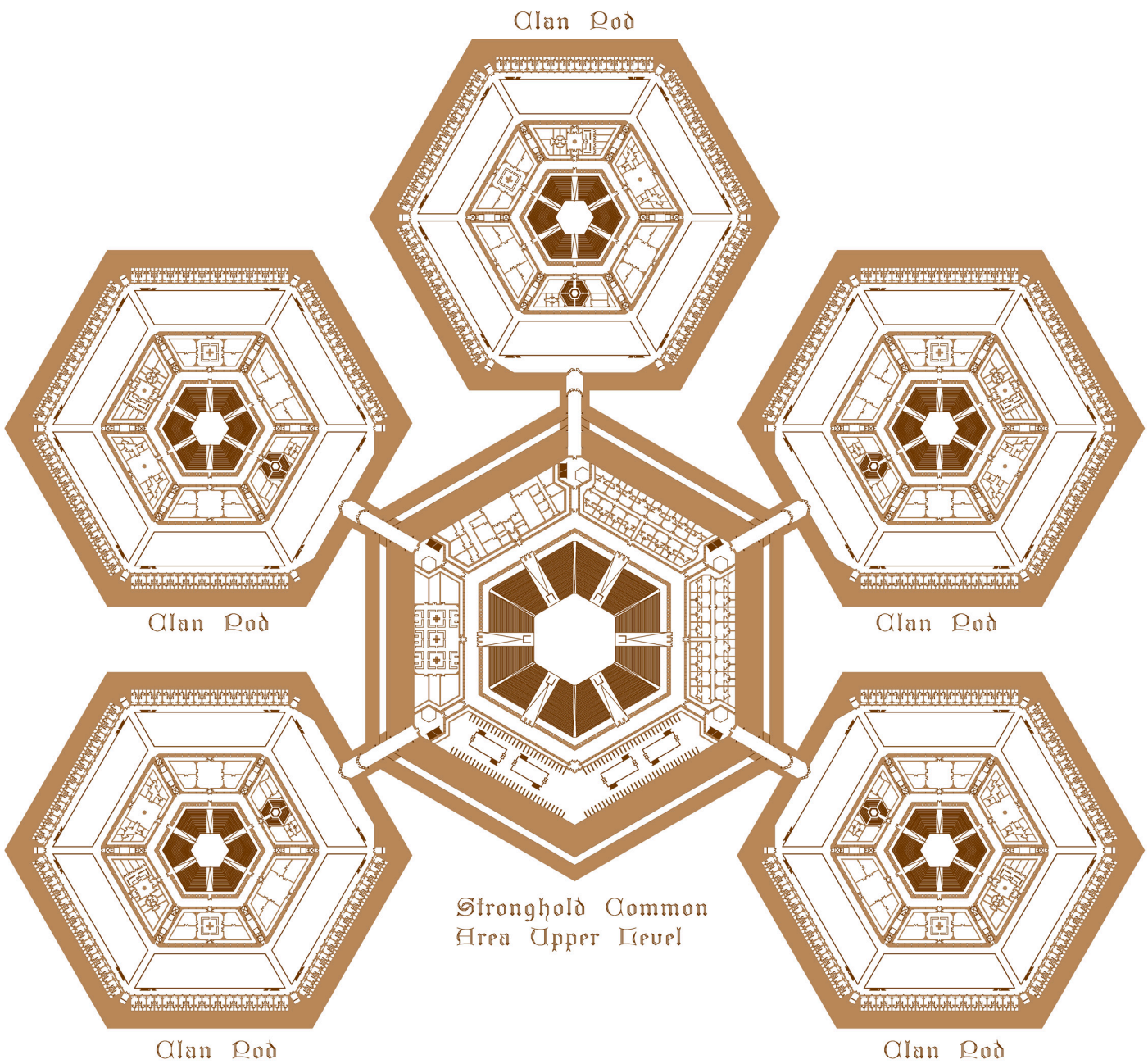
Stronghold Common
Area Middle Upper Level



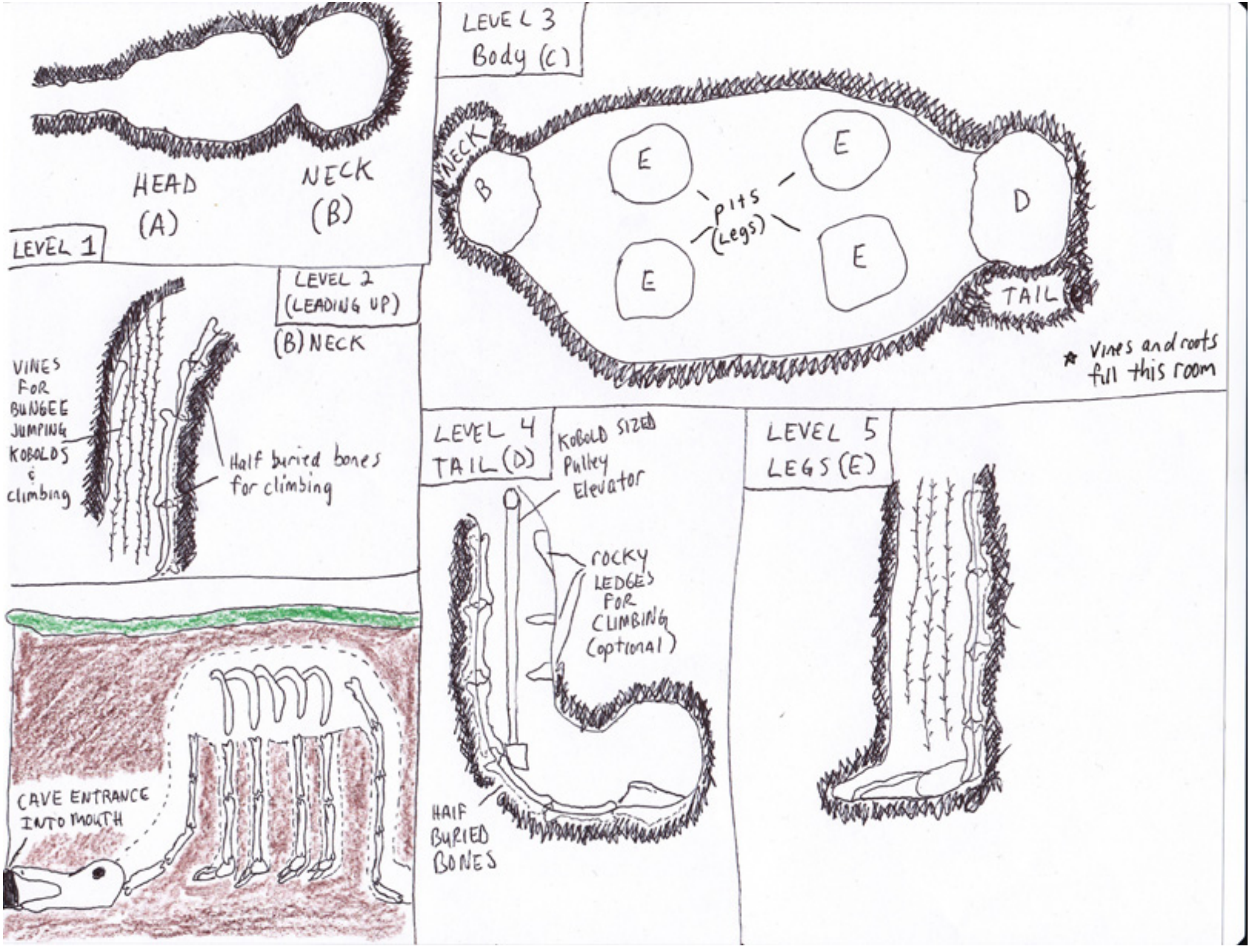
Stronghold Common
Area Middle Lower Level



Stronghold Common
Area Lower Level



Dwarven Stronghold Kaladish


HEAD
(A)
NECK
(B)
LEVEL 1
LEVEL 2
(LEADING UP)
(B) NECK
VINES FOR BUNGEE JUMPING KOBOLDS & climbing
Half buried bones for climbing
CAVE ENTRANCE INTO MOUTH
LEVEL 3
Body (C)
NECK
B
E
E
E
E
Pits
(Legs)
D
TAIL
* vines and roots full this room
LEVEL 4
TAIL (D)
KOBOLD SIZED
Pulley
Elevator
ROCKY LEDGES FOR CLIMBING (optional)
HAIF BURIED BONES
LEVEL 5
LEGS (E)

ARTICLE

KITCHEN SINKS AND FRYING PANS

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The epic-level heroes stand accused of heinous crimes against the Dragovar Empire. Rather than flee for their lives, they allow themselves to be taken prisoner so that they can gain an audience with General Kamal, the Imperial Regent, but not to plead their case. They intend to expose him as a mind flayer thrall and, in so doing, paint themselves as imperial loyalists. Talk about a risky gamble!

The heroes find themselves standing face-to-face with Kamal. Watching his back: an honor guard of Tiamat-worshiping dragonborn anti-paladins and scores of minions. The players think they have a fighting chance, and then out of nowhere a gigantic blue dragon and her brood arrive, and suddenly the likelihood of victory evaporates. A desperate stab at diplomacy proves fruitless, and as the battle erupts, scary reinforcements arrive to replace Kamal's slain minions while the anti-paladins turn their damage-dealing attacks into healing fuel for their dark general.

The battle lasts the entire session. When all's said and done, three of the six player characters have died spectacularly, and two more characters have turned invisible and withdrawn from the fight. The party wizard casts a mighty spell that sounds

Kamal's death knell, but as the Imperial Regent is engulfed in a magical blast of elemental energy, I flash back to a familiar scene that played out four sessions earlier: The party's naked halfling rogue is a prisoner of the Vost Miraj, the imperial spy network. Zarkhrysa, the head of the agency, offers to use her influence and the information in her possession to turn the heroes from wanted criminals into saviors of the empire, on the condition that the rogue yield control of his private spy network (which he's been cultivating since mid-paragon tier). Four weeks ago, the rogue declined and escaped captivity, but he was forced to abandon all his gear. Among the rogue's belongings, Zarkhrysa found a single-use magic item called an *hourglass talisman*, a powerful device that allows its user to travel back in time briefly to affect changes in the campaign's history. Ironically, the players had been saving the talisman for the next time they faced a potential TPK, but they'd forgotten about it. It certainly never occurred to them that a villain might use the item and, in the process, put one character in the position of having to choose who lives and who dies.

When I planned the climactic encounter with General Kamal, I deliberately stacked the deck in the villain's favor knowing that if things went horribly awry, the Vost Miraj had the party's *hourglass talisman*. Accustomed to getting what she wants, Zarkhrysa uses the talisman to travel back in time to give the halfling rogue another chance to give her what she wants, and she's informed enough to know what will happen if he refuses a second time. The question is, will Oleander give up control of his spy network to save the lives of three companions killed in the future, or will he allow history to repeat itself and live with the outcome of the battle against General Kamal?

I cackle with glee when the player characters come into possession of powerful magic items, only to let them fall into the hands of villains who use them to make the PCs' lives a living hell. It's not something you can plan for, and it's not actually the topic of this week's article. It just makes me happy.

When I first learned how to play D&D, there was very little guidance on how to build a balanced encounter, by which I mean an encounter designed to challenge player characters without outright obliterating them. TSR published a veritable horde of adventures that I could study and emulate, but close examination of those adventures yielded some interesting facts. For one thing, it wasn't uncommon to see a mid-level adventure that included low-level

monsters and high-level monsters, with chambers that contained monsters by the dozens. An adventure labeled "for levels 8"“12" didn't preclude *anything*, and the prescribed level range was at best a shot in the dark.

It wasn't until 3rd Edition that great effort was taken to compare the power level of PCs with the power level of monsters and define what constituted an easy, challenging, or overwhelming encounter. Words were written to delineate what percentage of encounters should be "appropriate" for the party's level. No doubt these efforts contributed to the longevity of many D&D campaigns, and many DMs were taught to believe that failure to adhere to certain encounter-building principles would shatter the players' enjoyment of the game. A new breed of adventures put these principles into practice, and DMs who studied them applied the lessons of balanced encounter design to their homebrewed adventures. The side effect of a system that prescribes an encounter-building formula is a tendency on the part of some DMs to make every encounter an "appropriate challenge" for the PCs, and as a consequence the players subconsciously become aware of the underlying truth: as long as they don't do anything blatantly foolhardy, the mathematics behind the encounter-building system will ensure the same outcome over and over. And that is, in a word, dull.

When I wrote "Life's Bazaar," the first adventure in *The Shackled City* adventure path (which first ran in *Dungeon* magazine and was later published as a hardcover book by Paizo Publishing), I made the main villain a beholder. So what if the adventure was designed for first-level characters? I wanted to show DMs the extent to which encounter-building advice can be ignored and demonstrate by way of example that rules and formulas should never constrict creativity. The fact is, there are beholders in the D&D world, and they don't just show up when high-level heroes come knocking. If you want to tell a memorable story, then consider the tale of the low-level heroes who survived an encounter with a beholder, or the story of how the epic-level characters came upon a treasure chamber guarded by four kobold pipsqueaks whose barks were worse than their bites. Surprises can come in all sizes and levels.

LESSONS LEARNED

In my role at Wizards, I pay lip service to the principles of encounter design and even enforce them from time to time in published adventures, but in my own games I do not measure an encounter in terms of level or balance. I build encounters that I think will be fun and result in some memorable or exciting moments that the players will remember. The only burden I carry as the Dungeon Master is to be FAIR, but let's talk about what that word means in the context of running a D&D campaign. In my opinion, a "fair" encounter is one that allows for multiple outcomes. A fair encounter presents players with real choices and decisions, the consequences of which could lead to a completely unexpected and unplanned outcome. An unfair encounter is one where the conclusion is foregone. An unfair encounter turns your players into puppets unable to do anything you haven't allowed for.

I can get away with throwing everything including the kitchen sink at my players, as long as I honor the terms of our unspoken social contract. My players need to know that I'm on their side, that I'm rooting for their characters, and that I'll do whatever it takes to keep the campaign from becoming tiresome without depriving them of their

ability to affect what happens. One cure for a predictable campaign is to put the PCs in a situation they're ill equipped to handle, encourage them to consider unorthodox tactics, and be open-minded enough to let the players imagine solutions you hadn't considered. As a philosophy, it's not without risks, but if my intentions are transparent, my players are more likely to pin any unfortunate outcome on their own decisions and bad luck. I'll let them flail about, find their way around obvious hurdles, create their own hurdles, and even leap from the proverbial frying pan into the fire if that's what they really want to do. And if they're genuinely screwed, I'll try not to laugh at their misfortune, and I might just throw water instead of gasoline on the fire so that the campaign doesn't go up in flames.

Which brings us to this past Monday night. I threw a kitchen sink at the party in the form of a gargantuan blue dragon, and consequently the players knew they had very few rounds to expose General Kamal's true nature. However, an invisible imp that the PCs had unwittingly summoned one week earlier thwarted their negotiations, drew attention away from Kamal, and incapacitated the party's dragonborn rogue at a critical moment. Add to that a string of botched saving throws and scores of minions dealing 20 damage per hit. And yet, even with overwhelming foes arrayed against them, the PCs ultimately accomplished what they set out to do. Kamal was slain after being exposed as a monster. The *hourglass talisman* was my back-up plan in case of TPK, but I ended up using it as a cliffhanger instead. There's a lot hinging on one character's dilemma, and I look forward to seeing how it pans out.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

ICE CAPADES

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. It's the beginning of paragon tier. The player characters have just arrived in Io'galaroth, a major city hewn from a cluster of vast coastal grottos. The sheer number of adventure possibilities quickly overwhelms them, but one particular mystery proves especially alluring. A sea captain is murdered shortly after disbanding his crew, leaving his docked ship unattended. Rumor has it the captain was working for Sea King Senestrago, and Senestrago pays off the local magistrate to have the ship's secret cargo taken to a secure warehouse. Through their own investigations, the PCs learn that the *Morkoth* was transporting a clutch of catastrophic dragon eggs, which Senestrago and his genasi accomplice need for a devastating ritual that can sink an island.

The player characters don't know much about Sea King Senestrago or his supporters in Io'galaroth, so they turn to a frienda tiefling sexpot named Excellence. The PCs helped Excellence out of a scrape, and since then she's been their most reliable source of information. In fact, thanks in part to the DM and her well-traveled past, she knows a great deal about everything. You might say she's infallible, although her playfully conniving tiefling demeanor makes it somewhat difficult to take her at face value. When the PCs aren't sure how to proceed given

what they've learned, Excellence tells the player characters that Senestrago's power has diminished of late, and he's losing ships to his rivals. Senestrago's ill fortune has bred discontent among his once faithful captains, as well as an unhealthy amount of animosity. Excellence's information spurs the player characters to investigate two local captains whose ships fly the Senestrago flag. It turns out that both captains have their eyes on Senestrago's secret cargo. The PCs decide to sow discord between the two crews and keep them distracted while they snatch the eggs from under Senestrago's nose.

There are many archetypal D&D characters, from the drunken dwarf fighter who doesn't get along with elves to the kleptomaniacal halfling rogue who picks the pockets of every merchant he meets. There are recurring archetypes for nonplayer characters as well. One of my favorites is **the know-it-all**.

I believe every campaign needs at least one know-it-all NPC, and the sooner the player characters make his or her acquaintance, the better. The know-it-all might possess clarity of mind that borders on omniscience, or the know-it-all might be a streetwise scoundrel with an unfailingly reliable information network. However the know-it-all comes by his or her knowledge, it is consistently "on the money." The know-it-all might be someone the PCs like and respect, or someone with whom the PCs deal with out of dire necessity. The important thing is that they have access to someone who knows more than they do about a great many things. The know-it-all helps keep the campaign moving forward when the PCs are floundering or otherwise lack direction. Here's someone the DM can use to communicate information he or she wants the players to knowinformation that isn't easily obtained by other means.

There might be limits to the know-it-all's knowledge, and the campaign can (over time) introduce different know-it-all NPCs possessing different fields of experience. The one characteristic they share, however, is reliability. If your campaign is anything like mine, it's layered with deception, and the players need at least one NPC whose word they can trust and who will serve as a light in muddy waters. That's not to say that the know-it-all is there to solve every mystery the campaign has to offer. Some know-it-alls are better at providing advice than useful information. However, if the player characters are stuck, the know-it-all serves to guide them true. The know-it-all might not know who murdered the town burgomaster, but he or she might advise the heroes to attend the funeral and pay close attention to those in attendance in case an important clue presents itself, or the know-it-all might "have it on good authority" that the burgomaster was investigating rumors of a thieves' guild moving into town. The know-it-all might not have the answer written in blood, but the know-it-all can help keep the players on track.

LESSONS LEARNED

It's easy to imagine a situation in which lazy or befuddled players might become so dependent on their know-it-all NPC that they refuse to think for themselves. This has never been a problem for me because my players are smart, and they know the risk of "going back to the well too often." They also know it doesn't take much DM effort to make their beloved know-it-all NPC "disappear." You don't need to kill off the know-it-all at the first hint of player abuse. Perhaps the meeting is thwarted when the know-it-all is drawn away by some other minor crisis; the players should take that as a warning. The know-it-all isn't just sitting around waiting for the PCs to show up with another problem to solve. The sooner my players realize that the know-it-all serves me as much as it serves them, the better.

My tiefling know-it-all, Excellence, is a spirited minx who uses her tail to flirt with men under the table. Her sexual escapades and playful indiscretion conceal a tough adolescence growing up in a society that treats tieflings as criminals. With acutely honed perception and insight, she casts her sharp gaze around a tavern full of drunken brutes and finds the one assassin hiding in their midst. She also never forgets a face or a name. And if you need to contact someone in the Horned Alliance or need to find someone who might have an *orb of dragonkind* to sell, she'll point you in the right direction.

Your know-it-all might be a different sort of character, such as a retired assassin with friends in low places, a reticent sage who's terrified of his own shadow, a mad wizard's talking cat familiar, a sarcastic efreet whom the heroes can summon in times of great need, or whatever else you dream up. Regardless of the form your know-it-all takes, this font of information and sage advice must be effective in his or her role. In the same way that villains must do villainous things to preserve their "evil cred," the know-it-all must not fail to be reliable or insightful, lest the character lose his or her purpose and the players no longer seek the NPC's knowledge or advice in times of need.

Here, then, are my guiding rules for know-it-all NPCs:

- A know-it-all does a great service to your campaign by feeding the PCs truthful information or advice that keeps things moving forward.
- A know-it-all doesn't need to know everything about every single thing, just everything about many things.
- A know-it-all never steers the PCs wrong but has better things to do than follow the party around all day.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

KNOW-IT-ALL

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. It's the beginning of paragon tier. The player characters have just arrived in Io'galaroth, a major city hewn from a cluster of vast coastal grottos. The sheer number of adventure possibilities quickly overwhelms them, but one particular mystery proves especially alluring. A sea captain is murdered shortly after disbanding his crew, leaving his docked ship unattended. Rumor has it the captain was working for Sea King Senestrago, and Senestrago pays off the local magistrate to have the ship's secret cargo taken to a secure warehouse. Through their own investigations, the PCs learn that the *Morkoth* was transporting a clutch of catastrophic dragon eggs, which Senestrago and his genasi accomplice need for a devastating ritual that can sink an island.

The player characters don't know much about Sea King Senestrago or his supporters in Io'galaroth, so they turn to a frienda tiefling sexpot named Excellence. The PCs helped Excellence out of a scrape, and since then she's been their most reliable source of information. In fact, thanks in part to the DM and her well-traveled past, she knows a great deal about everything. You might say she's infallible, although her playfully conniving tiefling demeanor makes it somewhat difficult to take her at face value. When the PCs aren't sure how to proceed given

what they've learned, Excellence tells the player characters that Senestrago's power has diminished of late, and he's losing ships to his rivals. Senestrago's ill fortune has bred discontent among his once faithful captains, as well as an unhealthy amount of animosity. Excellence's information spurs the player characters to investigate two local captains whose ships fly the Senestrago flag. It turns out that both captains have their eyes on Senestrago's secret cargo. The PCs decide to sow discord between the two crews and keep them distracted while they snatch the eggs from under Senestrago's nose.

There are many archetypal D&D characters, from the drunken dwarf fighter who doesn't get along with elves to the kleptomaniacal halfling rogue who picks the pockets of every merchant he meets. There are recurring archetypes for nonplayer characters as well. One of my favorites is **the know-it-all**.

I believe every campaign needs at least one know-it-all NPC, and the sooner the player characters make his or her acquaintance, the better. The know-it-all might possess clarity of mind that borders on omniscience, or the know-it-all might be a streetwise scoundrel with an unfailingly reliable information network. However the know-it-all comes by his or her knowledge, it is consistently "on the money." The know-it-all might be someone the PCs like and respect, or someone with whom the PCs deal with out of dire necessity. The important thing is that they have access to someone who knows more than they do about a great many things. The know-it-all helps keep the campaign moving forward when the PCs are floundering or otherwise lack direction. Here's someone the DM can use to communicate information he or she wants the players to knowinformation that isn't easily obtained by other means.

There might be limits to the know-it-all's knowledge, and the campaign can (over time) introduce different know-it-all NPCs possessing different fields of experience. The one characteristic they share, however, is reliability. If your campaign is anything like mine, it's layered with deception, and the players need at least one NPC whose word they can trust and who will serve as a light in muddy waters. That's not to say that the know-it-all is there to solve every mystery the campaign has to offer. Some know-it-alls are better at providing advice than useful information. However, if the player characters are stuck, the know-it-all serves to guide them true. The know-it-all might not know who murdered the town burgomaster, but he or she might advise the heroes to attend the funeral and pay close attention to those in attendance in case an important clue presents itself, or the know-it-all might "have it on good authority" that the burgomaster was investigating rumors of a thieves' guild moving into town. The know-it-all might not have the answer written in blood, but the know-it-all can help keep the players on track.

LESSONS LEARNED

It's easy to imagine a situation in which lazy or befuddled players might become so dependent on their know-it-all NPC that they refuse to think for themselves. This has never been a problem for me because my players are smart, and they know the risk of "going back to the well too often." They also know it doesn't take much DM effort to make their beloved know-it-all NPC "disappear." You don't need to kill off the know-it-all at the first hint of player abuse. Perhaps the meeting is thwarted when the know-it-all is drawn away by some other minor crisis; the players should take that as a warning. The know-it-all isn't just sitting around waiting for the PCs to show up with another problem to solve. The sooner my players realize that the know-it-all serves me as much as it serves them, the better.

My tiefling know-it-all, Excellence, is a spirited minx who uses her tail to flirt with men under the table. Her sexual escapades and playful indiscretion conceal a tough adolescence growing up in a society that treats tieflings as criminals. With acutely honed perception and insight, she casts her sharp gaze around a tavern full of drunken brutes and finds the one assassin hiding in their midst. She also never forgets a face or a name. And if you need to contact someone in the Horned Alliance or need to find someone who might have an *orb of dragonkind* to sell, she'll point you in the right direction.

Your know-it-all might be a different sort of character, such as a retired assassin with friends in low places, a reticent sage who's terrified of his own shadow, a mad wizard's talking cat familiar, a sarcastic efreet whom the heroes can summon in times of great need, or whatever else you dream up. Regardless of the form your know-it-all takes, this font of information and sage advice must be effective in his or her role. In the same way that villains must do villainous things to preserve their "evil cred," the know-it-all must not fail to be reliable or insightful, lest the character lose his or her purpose and the players no longer seek the NPC's knowledge or advice in times of need.

Here, then, are my guiding rules for know-it-all NPCs:

- A know-it-all does a great service to your campaign by feeding the PCs truthful information or advice that keeps things moving forward.
- A know-it-all doesn't need to know everything about every single thing, just everything about many things.
- A know-it-all never steers the PCs wrong but has better things to do than follow the party around all day.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

TRIPLE THREAT

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The morally ambiguous player characters have taken an 8-year-old eladrin girl prisoner. Her name is Aura of Icirion, and she's the young sister of the Prince of Frost, a powerful archfey. The heroes retire to Fellhaven, their sanctuary in the Feywild, and notify the Prince's underlings that they're willing to trade. An emissary arrives to conduct the negotiations, and the meeting is filled with pleasantries carrying a deadly undercurrent that threatens to erupt in violence at any moment.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the girl is released, although not without reluctance on her partafter all, she's taken a liking to the heroes and their quaint little world. But here's the fun part: When asked what they want in exchange, the heroes offer no suggestions. Instead, Chris Youngs (who plays the tiefling Deimos, also known as Sea King Impstinger) turns the question around, asking "What's she worth to you?"

Time for some of that vaunted DM improvisation.

I write this article from the sunny shores of Santa Monica, California, which is a far cry from the rainy, overcast suburbs of Seattle. As I do, I find myself thinking not about the droves of dog walkers and runners trotting up and down the beautiful strip of parkland that clings to a bluff overlooking the most remarkable beach. Nor am I thinking about the palm trees swaying in the warm Pacific breeze, or the ever-turning Ferris wheel on the Santa Monica Pierwhich, if you didn't know, is the western endpoint of Route 66. Never mind the kites making lazy circles over the sandy beach like paper birds of prey, or the handsome creatures nestled in lounge chairs about the hotel pool. Perched on my hotel balcony, I find myself thinking about Dungeon Masters . . . and how the world needs more of them.

I used to wonder why so many players are reluctant to assume the role of the Dungeon Master, and then it occurred to me: DMing demands one hell of a skill set. Lacking even one of the required skills, the role can be overwhelming. A DM's job is to come to the game table prepared and ready to entertain, and he or she needs to keep the game's other participants engaged for hours on end. No wonder some players are paralyzed with fear at the prospect of running a game session! It's a demanding and multi-faceted role. I don't think some DMs receive enough credit for what they do. (On the other hand, sometimes I think I get too much credit.)

If you're in the entertainment industry and can sing, dance, and act, you're what's known as a *triple threat*someone with a range of talent that provokes a certain amount of envy. Hollywood has many triple threats, from Catherine Zeta-Jones to Zac Efron. A particularly rare kind of triple threat is the accomplished actor who also writes and directs. Names such as Woody Allen, Orson Welles, and Quentin Tarantino spring to mind. They would make wonderful Dungeon Masters, don't you think? Good DMs are the triple threats of the tabletop gaming industry. They write, act, and

direct (in a fashion), and they do it with great aplomb week after week after week. As far as I'm concerned, they deserve their own awards show.

How many accomplished actors moonlight as equally accomplished writers and directors? The list is a very short one, I promise you. In fact, when you consider how long actors, writers, and directors have lived on this planet, it's a wonder the list isn't longer. It turns out that relatively few people possess the broad range of skills needed to do all three of these things well. And yet, we expect Dungeon Masters to be marvelous storywriters, actors, and directors. They're the ones creating new adventures for their players, breathing life into the NPCs, and keeping the players engaged and entertained. It's a demanding, artful, and multifaceted role. But here's the real kicker: more DMs are triple threats than not.

I spend a lot of time thinking about what makes a great DM. It's not enough to be one-third story writer, one-third actor, and one-third director. That's the recipe for being an adequate DM, not necessarily a great one. I believe the secret ingredient is improvisational skill. Great DMing is 10% preparation and 90% improvisation. (One could make an argument that my percentages are weighted too heavily on the side of improvisation, but I stand firm in my belief that it far outweighs preparation.) You can write a kick-ass adventure, breathe wonderful life into every NPC, and put your players through their paces, but if you can't improvise, you'll eventually hit a wall you can't climb over, or find yourself trapped in a corner and unable to talk your way out.

Writers, actors, and directors learn the importance of improvisation as part of their formal training. Writers learn techniques to overcome writer's block, actors learn ways to cope when they flub their lines, and directors discover ways to work around meddlesome budgetary constraints and personality conflicts. Call it what you will, but it's all improvisation.

If you're an experienced DM, you know that improvisation demands equal measures of intuition and confidence. DMs who lack sufficient intuition or confidence tend to have trouble improvising at the game table. When confronted by a sudden need to be creative, a good DM simply intuits how best to proceed and has the courage to act on that intuition. Sounds simple enough, but it takes a great deal of trust in oneself. Thespians figured this out a long time ago, and that's why they spend a lot of time doing improvisational exercises that teach them to trust their intuition and not to over-think the problem. Masters of improv don't need to devote a great deal of energy to the task of improvisation because they simply do what seems natural to them; in other words, they have the confidence to trust their intuition. The same holds true for great writers and directors, who rely on their intuition to clear creative hurdles that might cause others to stumble.

My improvisational skills are put to the test every time I run a game session, and anyone who's watched one of the live D&D Penny Arcade games knows that I'm not lying when I say my DMing style is 10% preparation and 90% complete and utter bullshit improvisation. Last year at a convention, someone asked me how I learned to improvise, and I didn't really have a good answer. Now I do.

LESSONS LEARNED

Confidence.

Dungeon Mastering is about creative expression, showmanship, and the confidence to do both. It's J.R.R. Tolkien meets P.T. Barnum. The DM not only brings a love of sword and sorcery to the table but also doesn't shiver when the time comes to *step right up*. What does P.T. Barnum do when someone asks him a question he doesn't know the answer to? He trusts his intuition and makes something upand everyone nods like he's the guy running the show. Because, after all, he is.

I'm not psychologist, but I believe that human intuition is developed through everyday experience. A Dungeon Master's intuition when it comes to storytelling and adjudication develops with routine exposure to films, TV shows, literature, fiction, comics, jokes, and campfire stories. The good news is that DMs, being creative souls, rarely fall short in the intuition department. They know a good story from a bad one, a well-developed character from a cardboard cutout, and so forth. However, confidence is a far more rare commodity, and DMs who lack the confidence to trust their intuition often have trouble improvising behind the DM screen. I know because I've been there.

"This idea is such a clichÃ©!"

"This could really mess up my campaign!"

"They'll accuse me of being mean!"

Sentiments such as these subvert the creative DM who wants nothing less than to create the best campaign ever. They really undermine one's confidence, do they not? I got over my own confidence issues by telling myself, over and over, that the players are on my side. Players, unless they're complete boobs, realize that DMing isn't easy. It demands a lot of skills. They're glad to have someone else to carry the torch. All they want is to have fun. "The DM brings the fun, and thus the DM is on our side." Great. So once you realize that the players want to have a good time, you can focus on coming up with crazy ideas to entertain them.

Maybe it starts with a clichÃ©: The characters are sitting in a tavern when a stranger emerges from the shadows and presents them with a quest. It's a brave DM who's willing to start an adventure with something so . . . pedestrian.

Here's the moment in the article where normally I'd tell you how'd I'd turn this clichÃ© on its head, or offer up some unexpected twist to arch the players' eyebrows and make them realize this quest is anything but ordinary. But the fact of the matter is that every DM out there has to answer the question based on what excites his or her audience, and no other group of players is like my group of players. So I'm not going to tell you what I'd do to keep things interesting for my particularly group. But I will tell you some of the questions I might ask myself if I was in need of some inspiration to help me improvise something:

WHAT WOULD ORSON WELLES DO?

Just as the stranger begins to talk, he falls face-first onto the table with a dagger in his back. The stranger is dead, and the dagger has the word "Sephistos" engraved on the

pommel.

WHAT WOULD QUENTIN TARANTINO DO?

The stranger barely has enough time to stick a dagger in the table and utter the name "Sephistos" when he's blown away by a murder squad of wand-wielding, devil-worshiping wizard-assassins who have the tavern surrounded.

WHAT WOULD WOODY ALLEN DO?

Why, he'd have the stranger open his mouth and start to speak some horrible truth about the nature of human existence, but pass out from nervous fright before he can complete his thought. When he comes to, the stranger admits that he's been following the adventurers' careers for some time and wants to join their party . . . and he's willing to give them his diabolical father's magical dagger as payment for indulging his hero worship.

My intuition tells me that any one of these ideas might work, but it's my confidence that will determine in a heartbeat which idea will thrill my players the most. And maybe I'll reject all of these ideas and go with my own gut instinct instead, just like I did last Wednesday night when Sea King Impstinger asked the most important question of the evening and I answered, "the undying gratitude of the Prince of Frost." But what works for my players won't work for yours, so here's the real question, o great DM:

Knowing your players as well as I know mine, what would YOU do?

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

SCHLEY STACK

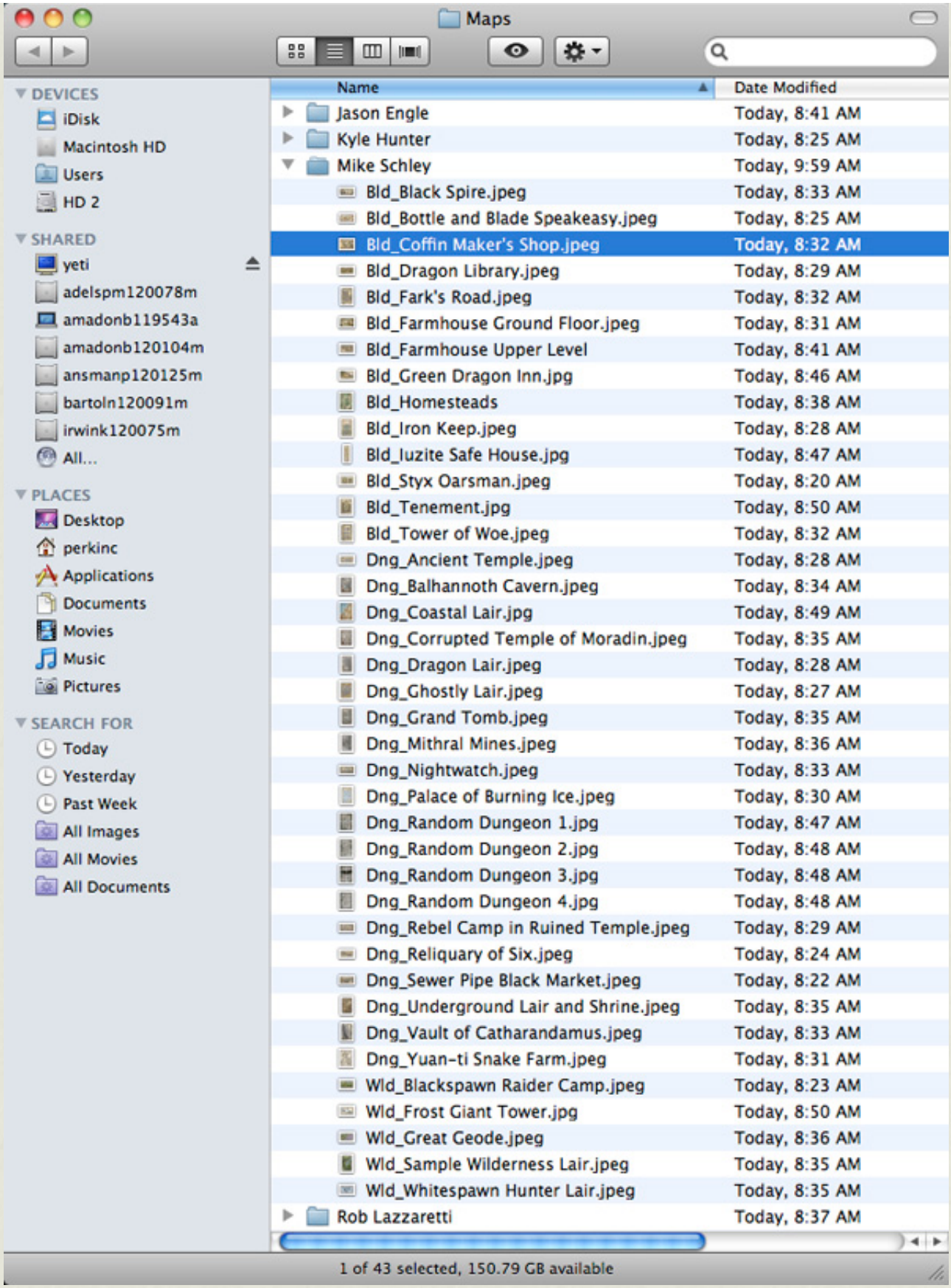
This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Paragon tier. Thanks to a number of successful quests, the party has amassed more wealth than some of the characters can reasonably spend on magic items. Two of the charactersBartho the human fighter (played by Matt Sernett) and Kithvolar the elf ranger (played by Jeff Alvarez)decide to buy a base of operations for the party . . . a clubhouse, if you prefer. Matt and Jeff invest in a coastal tavern called the *Crooked Capstan*, located in a city built inside a series of interconnected coastal grottos. The tavern, a favorite watering hole among seafaring merchants and gossipy locals, is built into a rough-hewn cavern wall. With the aid of their halfling rogue buddy Oleander (played by Peter Schaefer), Bartho and Kithvolar build a secret complex behind the tavern. Within these chambers, the PCs hide their loot and plot their next move.

I wasn't the least bit surprised when Bartho and Kithvolar decided to sink several thousand hard-won gold pieces into a run-down tavern, given the characters' rather

limited imagination and given Matt and Jeff's admiration for good beer. It occurred to me almost immediately that I would need a map of the tavern and the secret lair hidden behind it . . . you know, just in case a fight broke out in the taproom or a campaign villain decided to pay the heroes a visit. It hasn't happened yet, but given the frequency with which the party retires to its secret stronghold, it's only a matter of time.

I keep a folder of published maps on my desktop, organized by cartographer and subcategorized by type (building, dungeon, ship, wilderness). Since I work closely with cartographers as part of my job, my brain is trained to associate maps with the folks who worked on them. Thus, when I recall a map from memory, it's usually "that Mike Schley map of the tower" or "that Kyle Hunter map of the caravel." My folder looks something like this:



At the risk of shattering an illusion, I don't create new maps for every possible encounter location in my campaign. I could have created a new map of the *Crooked Capstan* if I really wanted to, but *c'mon*, there are so many preexisting maps of inns and taverns to choose from! I decided to plunder two Mike Schley maps originally published in the 3rd Edition adventure *Expedition to the Ruins of Greyhawk*. The map of the Green Dragon Inn was perfect for the tavern proper, and the map of the Iuzite Safe House would serve

nicely as the secret lair hidden behind the tavern. The only thing I had to do was add a secret door leading from one to the other.

LESSONS LEARNED

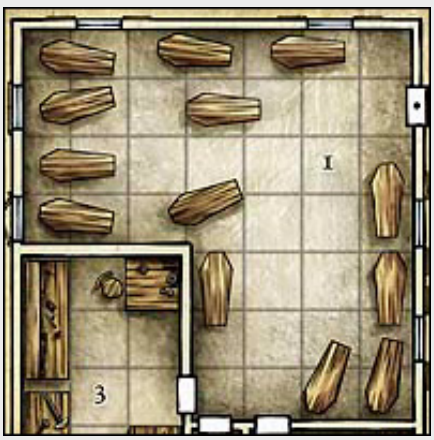
I love making maps, but like most DMs, I don't have a lot of time. When I need a map quickly, the first thing I do is rattle my brain for something that already exists, and when my brain comes up short, I go straight to my folder of maps all of which are plucked from the map galleries on the Wizards website.

I try to be discriminating when it comes to adding new maps to my desktop map folder. In general, I avoid picking up maps that the players are likely to recognize. I get more use out of generic maps that players don't instantly know ("Hey, that's the Tomb of Horrors!") and maps that can potentially be used more than once, maybe with a few minor tweaks and modifications made on the fly. A tower is a tower is a tower. And if *World of Warcraft* can get away with stock buildings, my campaign can, too! Fortunately for all of us, Wizards has created a multitude of versatile maps over the past two editions . . . more than any one DM can reasonably use, and more than most players can hope to remember.

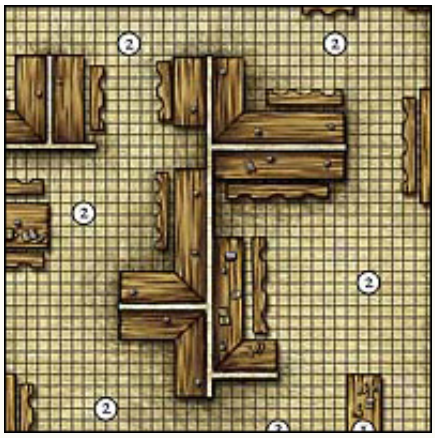
This column often focuses on providing sage DM advice, but this week I'd like to give you something you can USE. I've compiled a number of maps from my personal stash and presented them below. They're all from the Mike Schley collection he's one of my all-time favorites. I recommend you create your own desktop folder called "Maps," move all of these jpegs into it, and sort them in a manner to your liking. That way, the next time you need an inn, an alley, a temple, a wizard's tower, or a cave complex, you don't need to dig too deep to find inspiration.

Black Spire

Bottle and Blade Speakeasy



Coffin Maker's Shop



Dragon Library

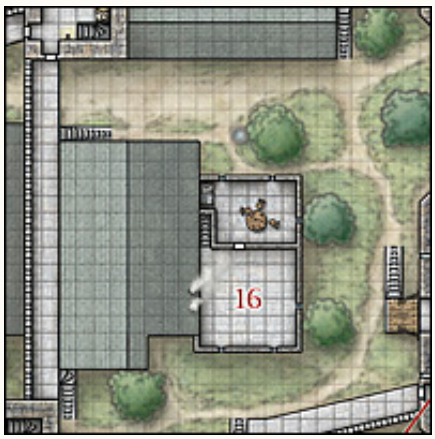
Fark's Road

Farmhouse Ground Floor

Farmhouse Upper Level

Green Dragon Inn

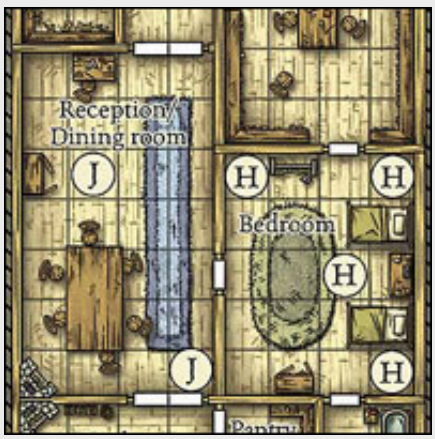
Homesteads



Iron Keep

Iuzite Safe House

Styx Oarsman



Tenement

Tower of Woe

Ancient Temple

Balhannoth Cavern

Coastal Lair

Corrupted Temple of Moradin

Dragon Lair

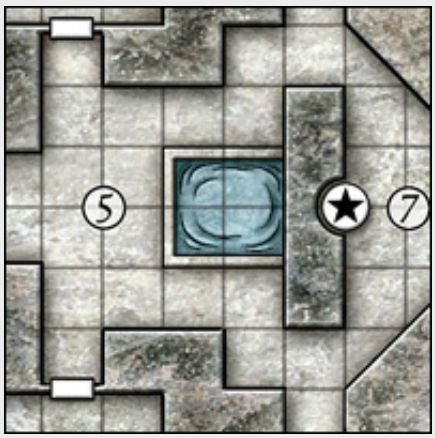
Ghostly Lair

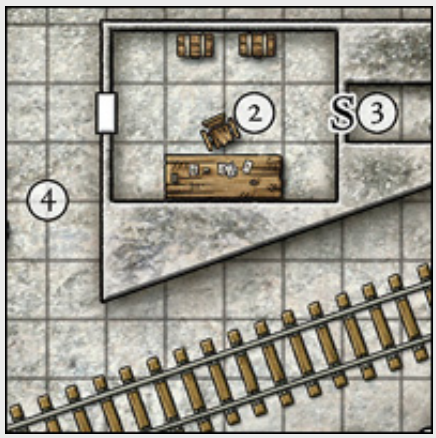
Grand Tomb

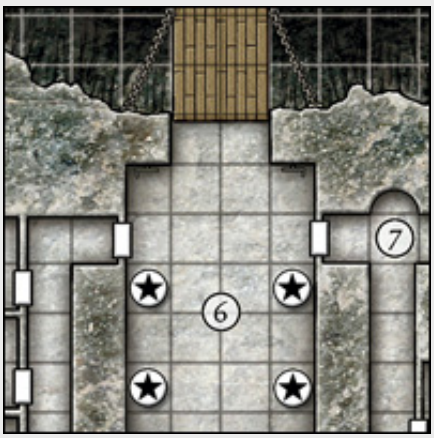
Mithral Mines

Nightwatch

Palace of Burning Ice



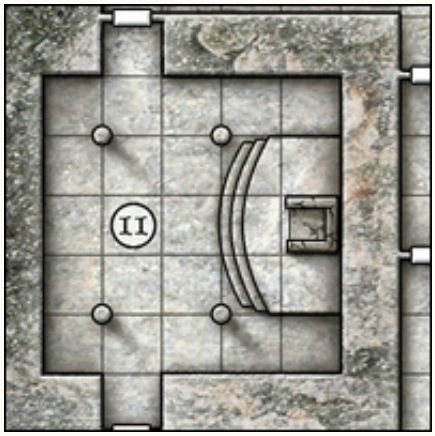




Random Dungeon 1

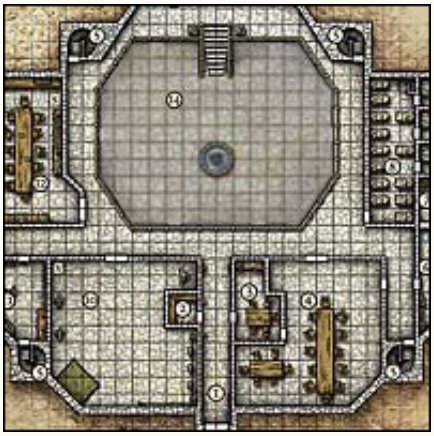
Random Dungeon 2

Random Dungeon 3



Random Dungeon 4

Rebel Camp in Ruined Temple



Reliquary of Six

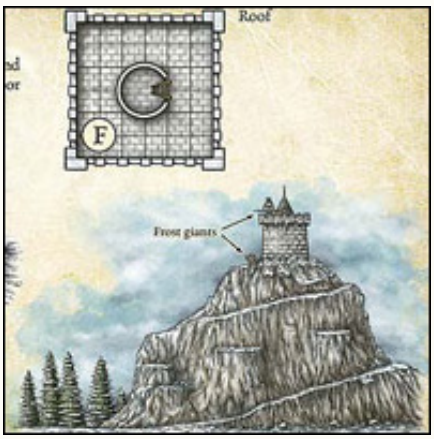
Sewer Pipe Black Market

Underground Lair and Shrine

Vault of Catharandamus

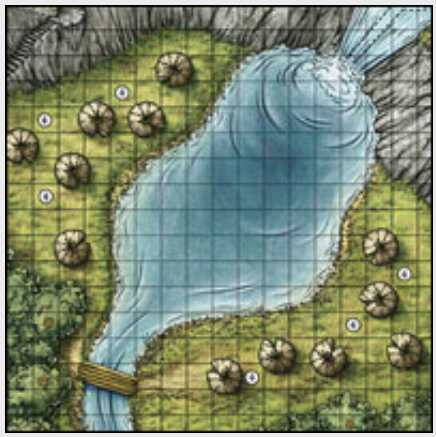
Yuan-Ti Snake Farm

Blackspawn Raider Camp

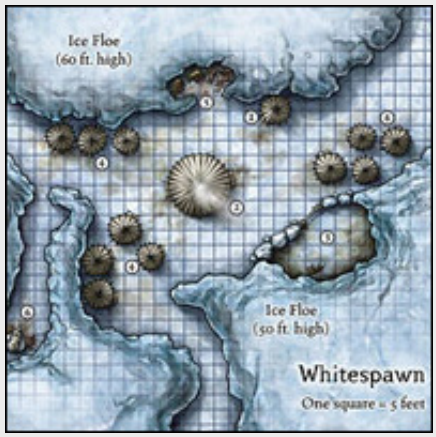


Frost Giant Tower

Great Geode



Sample Wilderness Lair



Whitespawn Hunter Lair

If you enjoy this sort of thing, let me know. I have a bunch more maps I'd be happy to send your way.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

DEMIGENIUS

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. To raise his sunken ship from the ocean depths, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) forges an infernal pact with the archdevil Dispater. As per the contract, Deimos vows to take a consorta succubus named Tyrannyand guard her with his life. A few months of game time later, the heroes are entertaining the undead ex-wife of the lich-god Vecna aboard Deimos's infernal flagship when, out of the blue, Tyranny stabs their guest with a dagger. The dagger pierces Osterneth's black shriveled heart but doesn't kill her. Enraged, Osterneth kills the succubusas well as any hope of an alliance with the heroes. In the ensuing battle, Osterneth is shoved overboard by the party's warforged, and the heroes make good their escape.

Dispater doesn't want to quibble over the terms of Deimos's infernal contract. Instead, he convinces Deimos that Tyranny's sacrifice was a clear act of redemption, and that he's willing to release her soul from eternal torment if Deimos so wishes. Convinced that Tyranny was acting in the best interest of his ship and crew, Deimos asks for her soul's release from the Nine Hells. However, instead of returning her in the flesh, Dispater binds her spirit to Deimos's ship. Now she's aware of everything that happens aboard the vessel and can exert control over those aboard as she sees fit.

Fortunately for the heroes, the news ain't all bad. Yes, their souped-up warship is possessed by an evil succubus, but Tyranny also returns with good news. The shriveled heart contained in Osterneth's ribcage was not hers but rather her ex-husband's, and piercing it imbued Tyranny's dagger with the power to slay Vecna.

A true genius, in my opinion, is someone who can come up with an entirely original ideasomething no one has concocted before. Most creative spirits, myself included, are not geniuses. As anyone who's played 1st Edition knows, geniuses have a minimum Intelligence score of 17. I'm lucky if I can roll 11 or higher on 3d6. At best, we're *demigeniuses* (*demigenii?*), which has no place on the D&D Intelligence scale and isn't even a real word. I just made it up.

In D&D terms, a *demigenius* is to a genius what a demilich is to a lich: a failed, lesser form of the latter. A demilich is not much more than a floating skull, but its soul-imprisoning power more than compensates for its lack of body and spellcasting ability. Similarly, a demigenius is a failed, lesser form of genius, but still awesome in its own way. And while a demigenius isn't good at coming up with a 100% original idea, he or she is quite capable of taking two or more existing ideas or things and mashing them together to create something fresh.

Demigenius storytellers can take two ideas and rub them together to get fire. Some storytellers are so good at it that the results achieve a semblance of originality. For example, a demigenius screenwriter can take the conflict between spirituality and technology, combine it with samurai swordfighting in a science fantasy milieu, and create *Star Wars*. He can also combine the 1930s pulp hero archetype, an obscure biblical myth, and the ungodly Third Reich to create *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Similarly, a demigenius Dungeon Master can wow even the most experienced players by answering the age-old question: What do you get when you cross a succubus with a warship?

LESSONS LEARNED

> *There are no new ideas; there are only new ways of making them felt.*
> Audre Lorde, Caribbean-American writer and activist

A lot of high-concept films combine two or more simple ideas to create something unique. Combine vampires and Valley Girls, and you get *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (both the 1992 film and the 1997""2003 television series). Take a cold Minnesota winter and add a pregnant sheriff investigating a crime spree, and you get *Fargo* (1996). Take a soft-spoken stunt driver and throw in a pair of two-bit California mobsters, and you get *Drive* (2011). One can also find strange yet wonderful combinations in other creative forms, including model kit-bashing (from Roddenberry's first U.S.S. *Enterprise* to Lucasfilm's first X-wing) and even the culinary arts (from the New York-style cheesecake dripping with Oregon-fresh blackberry sauce to the majestic Reese's peanut butter cup).

Combining two or more things to create something new isn't a guaranteed formula for success, but it's hard to judge success without first attempting the experiment. Battleships versus aliens. Cowboys versus aliens. Monsters versus aliens. The demigenius's first and only law of creativity: *Try all sorts of crazy combinations.* Eventually, something will stick.

To take a specific example from my Wednesday night game, I wanted to create some undead librarians to haunt a library I'd just dedicated to my buddy Vecna, the god of secrets and necromancy. (During the writing of this article, Rodney Thompson, Stan!, and I mused about the difficulties inherent in creating a "Buddy Vecna" statue, given that the Maimed Lord can't wink with only one eye and has a stump where his thumb's-up hand should be. Monumentally pointless conversations are alarmingly common in our "pit" at Wizards, and if you have no idea what "Buddy Vecna" refers to, combine writer/actor/director Kevin Smith with religious dogma, consult the Internet Movie Database, and the answer will present itself.)

So, anyway, I don't have any undead librarian miniatures, but I was fishing through my big blue coffin of miniatures and found a **caller in darkness**. Talk about two things that go well together! All those plastic screaming faces made me think of despondent librarians telling chatty students to *shut the hell up*, and I promptly set about creating a stat block that would turn my caller in darkness mini into the **arcane assembly**a mad fusion of wizard-librarian spirits dedicated to protecting their library of secrets from unwanted interlopers. I also ripped off some solo monster tech from the beholder in *Monster Vault*.

Here's the stat block for the arcane assembly, which you're free to pillage for home game use. The stat block is undeveloped, so don't expect it to creep into our digital tools anytime soon, and don't blame me if your players punch your lights out for unduly punishing their characters.

Arcane Assembly **Level 15 Solo Artillery**
Large shadow magical beast (undead) XP 6,000
HP 468; **Bloodied** 234 **Initiative** +10
AC 29, **Fortitude** 27, **Reflex** 29, **Will** 26 **Perception** +13
Speed 0, fly 6 (hover); phasing All-around vision, darkvision
Immune disease, poison, sleep; **Resist** 20 necrotic
Saving Throws +5; **Action Points** 2

TRAITS

All-Around Vision
Enemies can't gain combat advantage by flanking the arcane assembly.

Insubstantial
The arcane assembly takes half damage from all attacks, except those that deal force damage. Whenever the arcane assembly takes radiant damage, it loses this trait (save ends).

STANDARD ACTIONS

Shock (lightning) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +20 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d10 + 12 lightning damage.

Death Rays (necrotic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 20 (up to four creatures); +20 vs. Fortitude. These attacks do not provoke opportunity attacks.
Hit: 4d6 + 9 necrotic damage, and the target loses resistance (but not immunity) to necrotic damage until the end of the arcane assembly's next turn. If this damage drops the target to 0 hit points or fewer, the target dies.

Hush (necrotic, psychic) ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Attack: Close burst 2 (enemies in the burst); +20 vs. Will
Hit: 3d12 + 15 necrotic and psychic damage, and the target is dazed (save ends).

TRIGGERED ACTIONS

Magic Missile (force) ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy starts its turn within 5 squares of the arcane assembly.
Effect (No Action): Ranged 5 (the triggering enemy). The target takes 15 force damage. This attack does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Skills Arcana +19
Str 3 (+3) **Dex** 17 (+10) **Wis** 12 (+8)
Con 21 (+12) **Int** 24 (+14) **Cha** 18 (+11)
Alignment evil **Languages** all

Okay, fellow demigeniuses, when was the last time you took two not-so-original ideas or things and combined them to create something wonderful? Inquiring minds want to know, so leave a comment.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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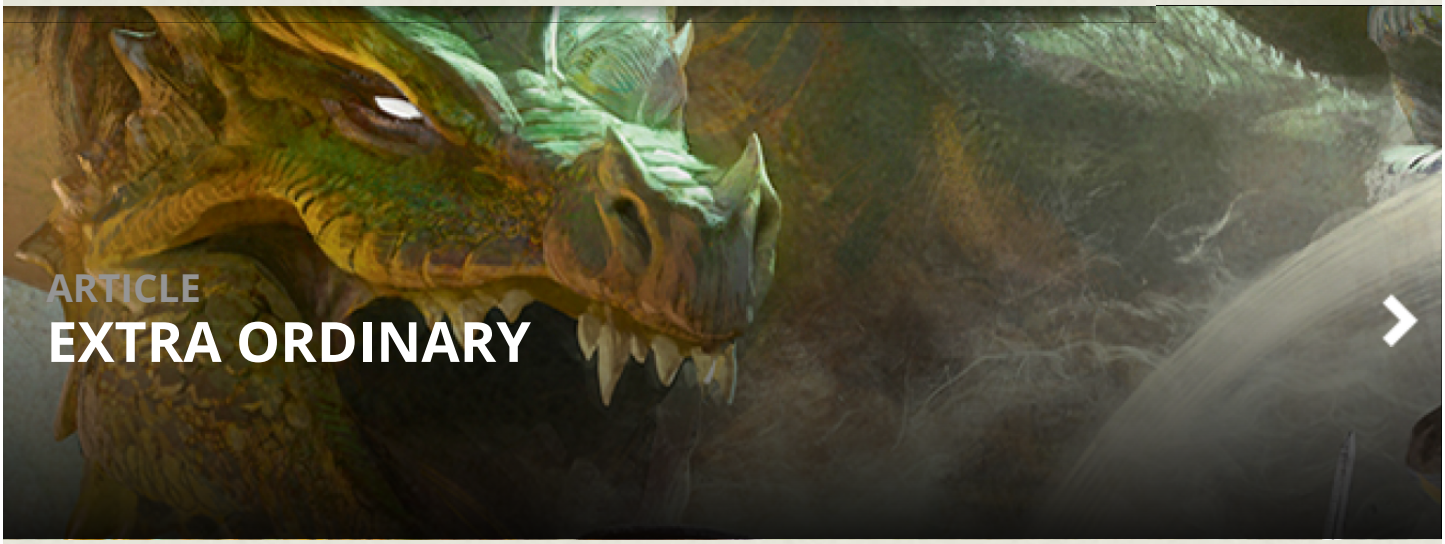
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

EXTRA ORDINARY

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The Sea Kings are powerful merchant lords who rule oceanic trade throughout the Dragovar Empire, and the party has two of them: Sea King Impstinger (a.k.a. Deimos), played by Chris Youngs, and Sea King Silvereye (a.k.a. Vargas), played by Rodney Thompson. For Deimos, becoming a Sea King represents the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, whereas Vargas never wanted to be a Sea King. As a champion of the Raven Queen, he won support among captains of similar faith, and they ultimately elevated him to his position of leadership. Such is the burden of the epic-level hero.

Recuperating from their harrowing exploits in the Frostfell, the heroes withdraw to their sanctuary on the island of Damandaros, where Sea King Silvereye keeps a warehouse. Vargas has some private matters to attend to, so he separates himself from the party, albeit briefly. (Never a good idea.) To no one's surprise, he's attacked in his own warehouse by evil mercenaries working for one of the party's many enemies. Although things look grim for Sea King Silvereye, at least he's on his own turf. He turns invisible, hides, alerts his companions using a *sending stone*, and anxiously awaits their arrival.

As weapons clash and spells explode in the Silvereye warehouse, two young children (a human and a dragonborn) are drawn to the ruckus like moths to a flame. Through an open doorway, they watch the battle unfold, mouths agape with astonishment. Occasionally, one of the player characters takes note of the young ones, urging them to stand back. When the battle concludes and the villains have been subdued, Deimos dusts off his large captain's hat, winks at the awestruck children, and says with deadpan charm, "Stay in school." Speechless with fright, the children dart away.

Heroes are extraordinary individuals in my world, as they are, I expect, in many D&D campaigns. They don't act like ordinary folk, they don't dress like ordinary folk, and they have little in common with ordinary folk. The world orbits around them, and wherever they go, the campaign follows. Because their characters operate at a much higher level, players easily forget that most people who populate the campaign world are plain, simple folks. Every so often, I like to remind my players that their characters live in a remarkable world of unremarkable people. When dealing with threats to the entire world, it's too easy for the heroes to forget what they're fighting for.

My campaign world is full of extras nameless common folk who have little or no impact on the lives of the heroes. And yet, every time a villain threatens to sink an island or run roughshod over a city, the heroes are supposed to care about what happens to these poor sods. Why should they? I mean, who cares if a bunch of nameless nobodies get wiped off the campaign map? D&D is all about finding treasure and gaining XP, isn't it?

Well, there is a kind of D&D game that's all about treasure and XP, but for the Iomandra campaign to resonate with my players, it needs to do more than make the characters more powerful. It needs to feel like a real place, where the party's antics have real, tangible effects on the people around them. The battle in the Silvereye warehouse was a fun battle with the usual mixture of combat tactics and witty repartee. However, I think the inclusion of the children as innocent spectators added a level of realism to the proceedings. Suddenly, the session is more than just an epic-level throw-down between the forces of evil and not-so-evil. Because on some level we're seeing events unfold through the children's eyes, their presence alters the tenor of the battle ever so slightly. Some of the heroes are concerned that the children might be drawn into the fray. Others seem more interested in showing off for the kids' amusement. These nameless, inconsequential NPCs outshone the villains of the encounter without ever uttering a word, and that is extraordinary.

LESSONS LEARNED

It's been my experience that when it comes to NPCs, most DMs focus on the ones that either want to kill the PCs or want something else from the PCs. It can be easy to forget the multitude of other NPCs who want nothing whatsoever; they exist simply to exist. Hundreds if not thousands of NPCs populate the average D&D campaign, and most of these ordinary folks have no dialogue and never interact with the heroes in any meaningful way. Thus, it can be surprising (in a good way) when they do.

Inconsequential NPCs add texture to any campaign world. Their actions, however innocent or banal, serve to remind the player characters that there's more to the world than dungeons, monsters, and treasure. It reinforces the notion that people actually live in your world, and most of them aren't out to get the heroes and want nothing from them, either. I use ordinary extras to make my player characters feel like the world is worth saving; consequently, they tend to be nice, honest people with no ulterior motives and no secrets to be laid bare.

If you're unaccustomed to using ordinary extras in your games, here are seven simple examples you might try throwing in as opportunity allows:

Example #1: A young girl selling kittens offers to give one to the player characters for free, out of simple kindness or thanks. (A new party mascot, perhaps?)

Example #2: A simple farmer apprehends a criminal who tried and failed to pick the pocket of one of the player characters. (Sometimes, even heroes need a helping hand.)

Example #3: A pair of bickering lumberjacks offers to share their fire with the player characters, or point them in the right direction through the woods. ("Odd couples"

provide lots of great roleplaying fodder.)

Example #4: An old woman commends the heroes for who they are, then prattles on about her dead husband who fancied himself a "slayer of evil" like them. (Perhaps the heroes have heard of him.)

Example #5: A street magician spots the player characters as they move through the market and calls one of them up on his small stage to participate in a simple parlor trick, much to the joy of a small crowd. (How often do the PCs receive cheers from a crowd?)

Example #6: A town guard, whose wife just gave birth to a healthy baby girl, hands each of the player characters a cigar. (PCs are more inclined to save the world if they care about the people in it.)

Example #7: A tavern regular challenges a character to a friendly arm wrestling challenge (opposed Strength check) or drinking contest (opposed Endurance check). (Win or lose, the NPC is gracious and speaks well of his competitor. The world needs such nice people.)

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

THE EEL AND THE STINGRAY

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

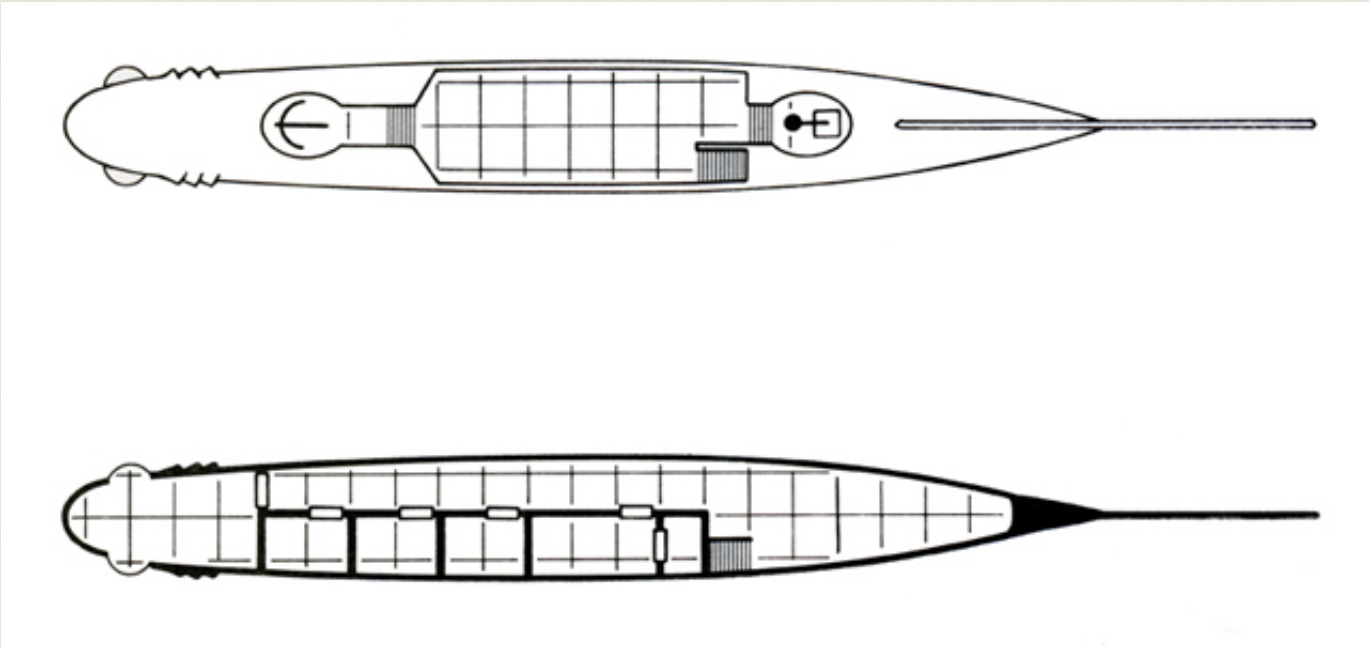
MONDAY NIGHT. Toward the end of paragon tier, the player characters decide to set aside their many distractions and make good on a promise to Arkyn Tavor, a dwarven undersea explorer to whom they owe a favor. He's a member of the Deeplantern Guild, and he needs the party's help to retrieve an artifact that not only symbolizes the bond between Moradin and Erathis but also symbolizes the unity of the dwarven clans. The hammer lies sealed in the vaults of Harth Fantaro, a sunken citadel that has since become home to a powerful aboleth mother and its slimy brood. To accomplish his quest, Arkyn spent his family fortune on a submersible resembling a stingray. Armed with this totally awesome ship, Arkyn, his crew, and the heroes descend into the briny depths.

Long story short, I needed a submarine map that could be blown up to miniatures scale without looking like total crap. However, there aren't many good submarine maps "out there" to choose from. Having already plundered ship maps from the

Spelljammer campaign setting, I decided to go back to that source and search for a map that could be scanned and then modified using Adobe Photoshop. I didn't find anything in the boxed set proper, but I did find an "eel ship" map in a Spelljammer supplement called *Lost Ships*, written by (strangely enough) Ed Greenwood.

I'm a busy guy, as most DMs are, and it takes less time for me to modify a scanned image in Photoshop than to create something entirely new. As much as I like creating maps from scratch, I decided to take the path of least resistance for the Deeplantern Guild submersible. The eel ship has a sleek submarine-like profile, but it wasn't until I'd scanned the image that it occurred to me how easily the design could be modified to look like a stingray. By the time I was through, the eel ship would be nigh unrecognizable. My players might even think I'd designed the entire craft myself.

THE EEL



Here were my mental notes on the eel ship map:

1. Given the clean line work of the original, I would need to scan the map at 600 dpi sufficient resolution to enlarge it for miniatures play as well as modify it to serve my needs.

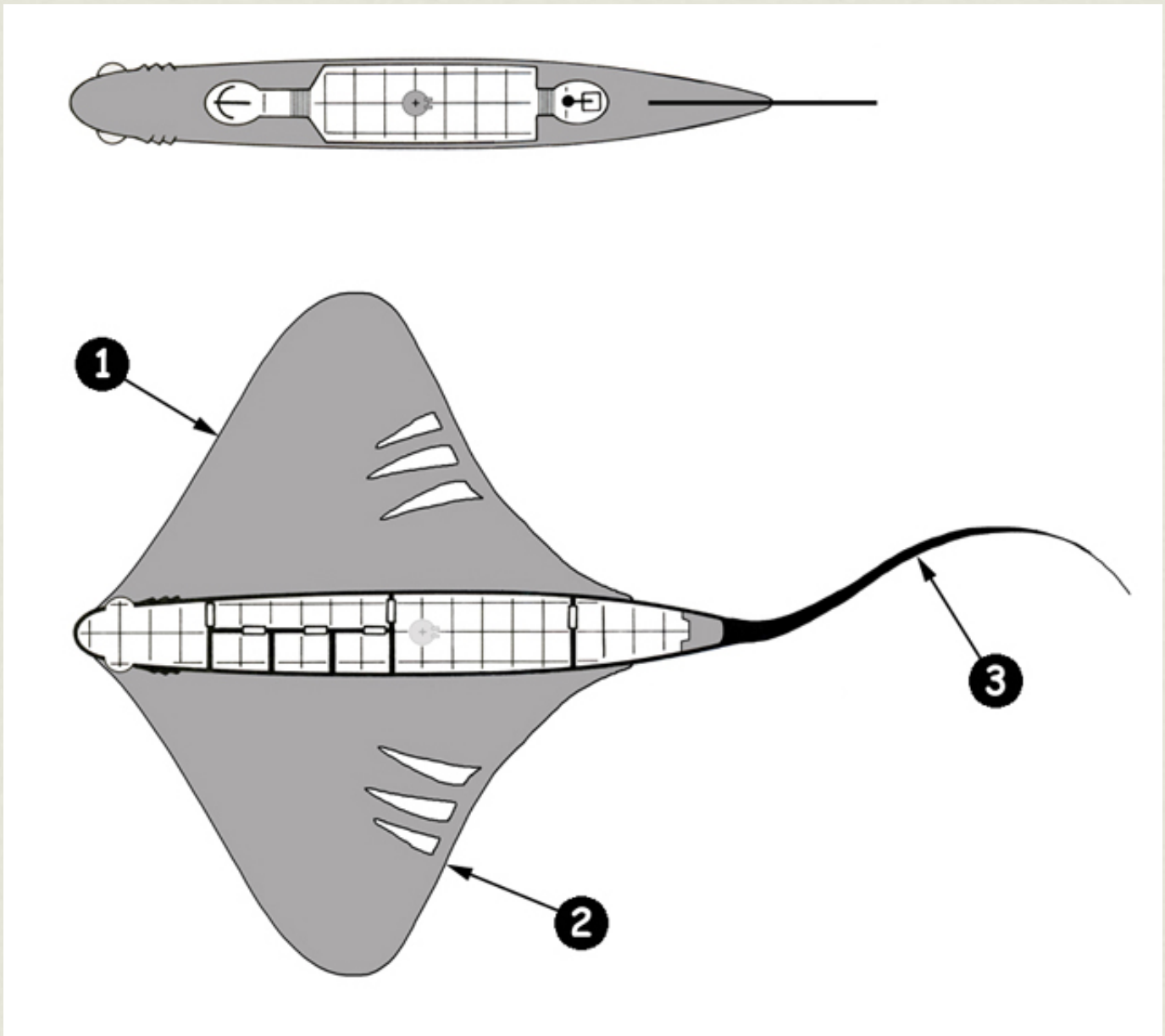
2. To turn the eel into a stingray, I would need to add pectoral fins (the "wings") and a whiplike tail.

3. The staircase between decks is troublesome. There's the practical concern of flooding, but even the way the stairs are drawn rub me the wrong way: They don't snap neatly to the grid, which makes it hard for players to determine where to place their minis when their characters are standing on the stairs.

4. Finally, there are a lot of small, confined spaces below deck. That's true

of submarines in general, but it doesn't allow for much tactical movement in combat.

THE STINGRAY



Here's how the stingray ship was created using the eel ship as its chassis:

Adding the Fins: As a separate layer in Adobe Photoshop (**Layer > New**), I drew *one* of the ship's pectoral fins **[1]** using my mouse and the program's drawing tool. It took several tries to get the shape of the fin just right. Once I had the curvature I wanted, I duplicated the layer in Photoshop (**Layer > Duplicate Layer**), flipped it (**Edit > Transform > Flip Vertical**), and positioned the duplicate fin **[2]** on the other side of the ship. The end result: two fins that are mirror images of one another.

Adding the Tail: I erased the back end of the eel ship to make room for the tail **[3]**, which was done freehand using my mouse and the drawing

tool. Again, I drew the tail as a separate layer so I could safely delete the layer and start over if I wasn't happy with the end result.

Remodeling the Interior: I used Photoshop's eraser tool to remove the stairs and any interior walls I didn't want, and then I used the software's copy and paste functions to create duplicates of grid lines, walls, and doors as separate layers that I could move around and reorient to my heart's content. I did a little bit of touching up using the drawing tool afterward, but not much. Like a LEGO set, I just rearranged existing elements. The hatch connecting the two levels was new, however. As a new layer, I made a circle and added some hinges, and then made a copy of it (another layer) for the lower deck, with the opacity reduced to 20% on that layer to give the impression it's set into the ceiling instead of the floor.

Finishing Touch: By the time I'd finished noodling, my map had multiple layers, from fins to doors. When I was satisfied with the overall design, I flattened the image (**Layer > Flatten Image**) and then used Photoshop's paint bucket tool to apply gray tones in certain areas (the fins and outer hull primarily).

LESSONS LEARNED

I don't need an art degree to churn out a serviceable map, especially if half the work is done before I begin. As you can see, I can scan an existing map and modify it using Photoshop to suit the needs of my home game. Armed with sufficient hardware and software, so can you.

For the record, it took me less than 3 hours to "build" my stingray submarine. In a half hour, I can enlarge the map so that the grid squares are 1 inch across, slice the map into sections (saving them as separate files), print them out on sheets of paper, tape them together, and lay the finished map on my gaming table at work. If I had access to a printer that could handle oversized paper, that would be a different story, but I work with what I have. Depending on the printer I use, it could take a while to print the map at 600 dpi, so if I'm in a hurry I'll print out the maps at 300 or 150 dpi. Even at that resolution, my players won't need to imagine what it's like to run around inside a stingray submarine; they'll be able to see it.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

STAN! DOWN

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Several months ago, a dragonborn rogue named Baharoosh (played by Stan!) joined the party. From the day he arrived, he made it clear that he was an agent of the Vost Miraj (the intelligence gathering arm of the Dragover Empire's martial caste), sent to aid the party in its fight against the more extreme elements of the empire, and to send back reports about their activities. The party was understandably suspicious of Baharoosh, but they were a bit perplexed as to what to do with a spy who showed his ulterior motives so plainly.

Over time, Baharoosh proved his loyalty to the group and revealed his conflict with his Dragovar masters (he was a devout worshiper of Bahamut who wanted to purge Tiamat's influence from the empire), but he was never quite able to garner the full trust of the other characters. They always wondered where his ultimate loyalties lay, and whether he could be trusted with sensitive materials and information.

In recent weeks, the party even came to question Baharoosh's dedication to their work. Whenever a fight commenced, he quickly fell to the ground and was spirited off by Vost Miraj minions. When the hostilities were done, Baharoosh would

reappear, fully healed, with some new assignment from his spymaster, Zarkhrysathe latest of these assignments being to secure the signature of a Grand Vizier on a document that would brand him as a traitor to the empire. Unfortunately, the document also implicated the Shan Qabal (the research arm of the arcane caste to which the party wizard, Alex, belongs) as having been behind a terrorist attack on the Dragovar capital city.

Baharoosh helped the other characters rewrite Zarkhrysa's document so that it more blatantly condemned Turazad but made no mention of the Shan Qabal. After the party ambushed the Grand Vizier and dominated him to get the signature, Baharoosh brought the document to Zarkhrysa who, upon seeing the modifications, looked coldly at her once trusted agent and said menacingly, "I am NOT pleased."

Hi, I'm Stan!, one of the D&D producers at Wizards of the Coast and the guy who plays Baharoosh in Chris's Monday night campaign. With all that's happened to my character lately (and the overview above is just the start of the story), Chris asked if I'd step in and take the reins of the column for a week to discuss what I think about the way Chris, as the DM, handled my character's latest predicament.

Let me begin by saying that over the last several weeks of game play, I've made more than a few questionable tactical decisions and suffered a phenomenal string of bad die rolls. In the previous half dozen or so major encounters leading up to this past week's session, Baharoosh had been poisoned, dominated, swallowed whole, and beaten into unconsciousnessgenerally within the first three rounds of combat in any given fight. I failed nearly every saving throw, Perception check, and death save that crossed my path. There was more than one occasion where Baharoosh should have died. The party was forced to leave him behind, or worse, didn't have any idea where he was. My poor dragonborn spy was on death's door, and all Chris had to do was let things proceed on their natural course to let Baharoosh pass silently from the campaign.

But he didn't.

Each time, Chris came up with an inventive, feasible, and logical (within the campaign parameters) reason for someone to save Baharoosh's life. Often it was the Vost Miraj, and at least once it was Zarkhrysa herself. And each time there was a price to pay for this interventiona mission to be achieved or a piece of information to be delivered.

Of course, from the perspective of the other characters, it seemed like Baharoosh was constantly abandoning them during the battlesrunning off to hide under the hem of his spymaster's skirt, and only coming back when the coast was clear. *[DM Note #1: For the record, dragonborn spymasters don't wear skirts in my campaign. They wear Kevlar girdles.]* Consequently, Baharoosh had to prove his value to the team again and again. But every time he did, it was by performing an act that made it clear that he valued the party more than he did the spy organization, thus decreasing the

likelihood that the Vost Miraj would be there to pull his fat out of the fire the next time.

In this latest session, Baharoosh had his loyalties very clearly and plainly tested. Zarkhrysa, tired of his failures, expressed her displeasure as described above and, when Baharoosh replied with a defiant "I know," she pulled out a death warrant, wrote his name on the document, signed it, and said, "You could save us all a lot of trouble if you simply do the job yourself, like any honorable dragonborn would." He was alone in hostile territory, without the party to back him up. *[DM Note #2: The other characters were hiding not terribly far away, but to Stan!'s chagrin, they decided to pick a fight elsewhere.]* Faced with the head of the imperial spy corps who wanted him dead, Baharoosh drew his weapon and launched an all-out fight for his life.

Unfortunately, my recent spate of bad rolls continuedBaharoosh couldn't hit a blessed thing. Chris, on the other hand, was rolling particularly well, so Zarkhrysa and her minions had no trouble bringing the rebellious Baharoosh to his knees. Within three rounds, he was bloodied, having made no attack roll higher than an 8 the entire time. The kicker came when Baharoosh was dominated by the spirit of an ancient yuan-ti prince possessing one of Zarkhrysa's allies (really . . . look, I can't explain all this . . . I'm just a player).

When the opportunity arose to save against the domination, I rolled a natural 1.

"Now, do what you didn't have the guts or honor to do on your own," the yuan-ti commanded. "Kill yourself!"

Baharoosh raised his dagger, aimed it at his own heart . . . and I rolled a natural 20.

Although the self-inflicted blow dropped Baharoosh well below zero hit points, he didn't quite meet the death threshold of reaching a negative number equal to his bloodied score. On the next round, I made his first death save . . . and rolled a natural 1. Before I had a chance to fail two more death saves, though, Zarkhrysa picked up Baharoosh's own dagger and finished the job once and for all. Then her minions took Baharoosh's body away to make sure that it was disposed of in a place and manner that would ensure he was never going to be anything more than an unpleasant memory.

By the time the rest of the party finished their combat and got up to Zarkhrysa's office, she, the yuan-ti spirit, all the minions, and every last trace of Baharoosh were gone. Of course, from their point of view, this was exactly like what had happened at the end of the four previous fights. As near as they could tell, Baharoosh was off with his spymaster getting some new bit of informationhe'd show up again eventually. Or not. You never can tell with spies.

And so my character died. Permanently. And no one in the party will ever know, or perhaps even care.

LESSONS LEARNED

Telling this story to friends, a few of them remarked that they thought my DM had treated me badly. My character was put in a nearly impossible situation, with no resources and no access to the rest of the party. When things went (predictably) against my character, the villains killed him out of hand and removed the possibility that the party could retrieve and revive him.

Looks pretty bad for Chris and his reputation as a fair, quick-thinking, and fun-minded DM.

But, if you ask me, he did everything perfectly.

While this fateful session began *in medias res*, the scene was one that Baharoosh had arrived at organically. I chose for him to make all the decisions that set up the scene, and I even decided to have him march into that chamber where he knew the deck would be stacked against him. I chose to make him defiant rather than apologetic. I shifted the encounter from a menacing social interaction into full-on combat. Indeed, from the very beginning, I chose to play a character that was an active member of a morally questionable organization and about whose loyalties the party could never be certain. In other words, it was a long road getting to the "no win scenario" that Baharoosh found himself in, and I willingly had him walk every step along the way.

Chris certainly made it clear to me, at various junctions, that Baharoosh's actions would have consequences. I knew that he was offending Zarkhrysa, and that she had a well-earned reputation for taking revenge on those who crossed herembodied most

clearly by the skull of her predecessor that she kept as a trophy on her desk. *[DM Note #3: I thought it would be cool if Zarkhrysa kept the skull as a reminder of what could happen to her if she's not careful, and I liked the idea of the players never knowing if she had a hand in her predecessor's demise. But best of all, I hit upon the idea that Zarkhrysa would use Speak with Dead scrolls to solicit counsel from the skull. Seems like something a spymaster would do, don't you agree?]*

It is always fair, I think, for the DM to give a character bad choices to make, as long as the player understands the repercussions. And, in the wake of that, it is always reasonable for the DM to follow up on those repercussions if the character makes those choices anyway. In fact, I'd say that it's worse for the DM to spell out specific consequences for risky behavior, then not follow through with them when the time comes. Doing that can lead the players to feel like their characters can do anything they want without fear of reprisal or ramification. For my part, every time Baharoosh played fast and loose with his orders from his Vost Miraj handlers, I knew that he was risking being cut loose or (worse) being made a target.

Additionally, one thing that we all acceptplayers and DMs alikeis that the dice can sometimes be cruel. And in a game where success and failure are determined by dice rolls, being unlucky can be deadly for a character. There are, of course, many varied and sometimes subtle levels of success and failure, and the DM is there to adjudicate that sort of thing. But when one failure follows another, when die rolls come up repeatedly in the lower 20% of all probabilities, they begin to have a narrative weight of their own. *[DM Note #4: Tell that to the employees of Acquisitions Incorporated.]*

My string of bad die rolls clearly bespoke of a character having a bad day. (A bad week, actually.) Anything that could go wrong pretty much did. A bad Perception check didn't mean Baharoosh merely failed to notice a detailhe focused on the wrong detail, or saw things in a false context. A particularly low attack roll became more than an errant swing; it was an embarrassing misstep.

When the session was over, Chris asked me what I wanted to do next. He kept a door open for Baharoosh to returneven from such a definitive and seemingly inescapable endif that's what I wanted. But, after thinking about it for a day or two, I decided to let the poor dragonborn rest in peace. It's never easy to lose a character, and especially not so when that character falls in an embarrassing and ignominious set of circumstances. But there is something to be said for having the cold comfort of a story that makes sense. *[DM Note #5: I just didn't want to put Stan! through the pain of rolling up another 27th level character. I'd already tortured him enough.]*

Chris's offer, though, reminded me that he always is open to possibilities. His campaign is vibrant, and flexible, and able to absorb any particular event and keep rolling on. Like in the real world, life in Iomandra goes on and adapts to whatever set of circumstances the characters happen to create.

I'm not sure what my next character will be. But I have a sneaking suspicion that no matter what choice I make, there will be a niche somewhere in the Dragovar Empire for him, and (more than that) somehow there will be intrigue, menace, and most of all adventure waiting for him.

Now if I can only do something about my horrendous die rolls!

DM'S FOOTNOTE

I'd like to thank Stan! for bearing the burden of this week's column. In previous installments, I've talked about how character death is handled in my campaign, and this is not the first time I've backed a player character into a corner. Did I set out to kill Baharoosh? No. But as the campaign reaches its end, I wanted to put the character in the most dangerous situation he'd ever faced and bring a long-simmering conflict between him and his temperamental superior to a boil.

The thing that keeps my campaign alive for years on end is the idea that conflict comes in many forms and can be resolved in different ways. Most of my energy is spent thinking about how the actions and decisions of the player characters might give rise to new conflict. Every new conflict I can imagine becomes the seed for a future encounter, or sometimes an entire adventure. And not every conflict can be solved by the swing of a sword or a skill check. Sometimes it's about a character wrestling with his role in the party or his place in the world. Sometimes it's about choosing loyalties, turning enemies into friends, and turning friends into enemies.

If you ask me how Baharoosh died, I might say "bad dates" to be funny. *[DM Note #6: That's a* Raiders of the Lost Ark *reference, for all you 20-somethings who've never seen the film.]* A case could also be made that the Dice Gods were gunning for him, or that his demise was written into his genetic code at character creation. Or it could be that the fault lies with the other player characters who abandoned Baharoosh in his time of need. But the DM? I think not! After all, it's the DM's job to set up conflict and make it as interesting and immersive as possible. Okay, yes, it's true that I orchestrated the situation leading up to Baharoosh's death, but not because I wanted to kill off the character. If that were true, I wouldn't have given Stan! the opportunity to bring his character back. Ultimately, he chose Baharoosh's fate. The character had faced his demons and lost, and that's sometimes the way conflicts end.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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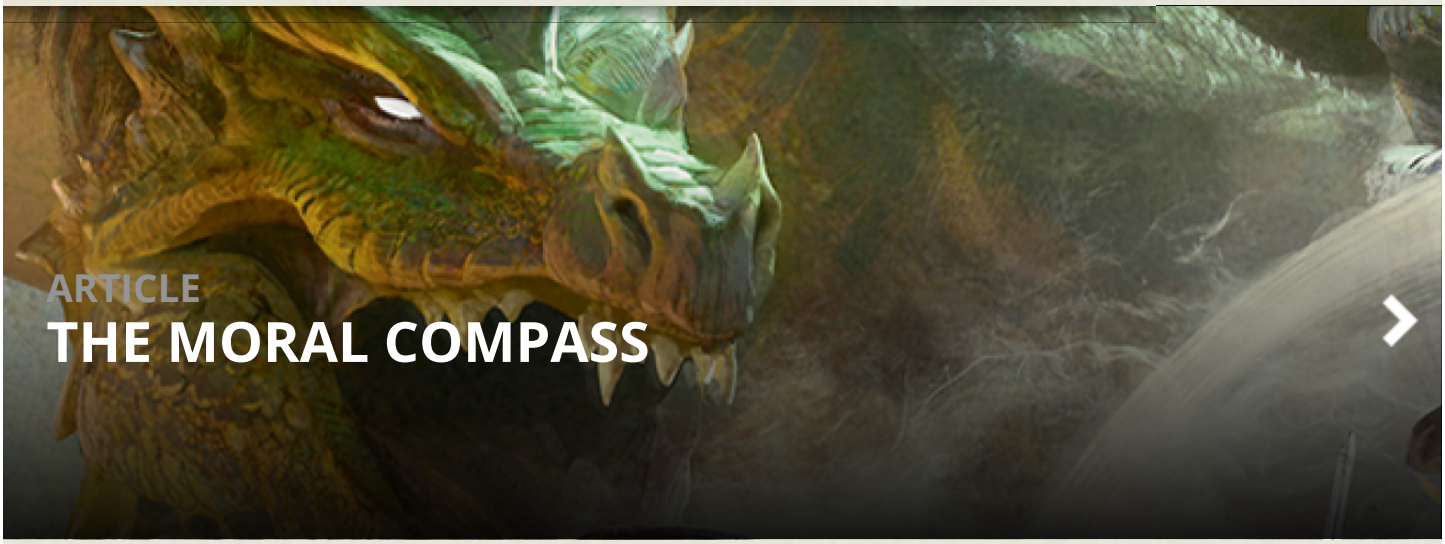
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

THE MORAL COMPASS

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. Several months ago, Trevor Kidd and his dragonborn paladin left the game. Long story short, Trevor was moving from Renton, WA to Middle o' Nowhere, IA. His adventuring companions wept bitter tears not because they were going to miss Trevor's not-so-hot dice, but because they were losing their moral compass.

Since Rhasgar's departure, the party has been trending toward apathy if not outright evil. One player character forged a pact with an archdevil. Another character accepted a "promotion" to pit fiend. The party began plundering tombs, torturing captives for information, throwing their weight around, and seeking vengeance against those who had opposed them. A good deed was no longer its own reward, and the running joke was that the heroes were actually the campaign's main villains.

A few weeks ago, Trevor informed me that he was back in town for few weeks, and I was quick to write his character back into the show. Rhasgar's a big deal in the Dragovar Empire these daysthe epitome of what makes the empire worth saving. A Dragovar warship delivers him to his companions, and he thrusts the heroes into

completing a quest that's been languishing for months: the destruction of an evil star entity named Allabar. The moral compass is pointing west, and the heroes are anxious to follow and prove to themselves and to Rhasgar that they're not just a murderous mob of self-centered scalawags.

I am exaggerating. I wouldn't classify my Wednesday night group as "evil." There are faint flickers of evil, to be sure. After all, morally upright people don't go around breaking other people's fingers. *CHRIS YOUNGS!* They don't punch little girls in the face, either. *ANDREW FINCH!* Even the vaunted Rhasgar, champion of Bahamut, struck a blind man once. But hey, no one said being the moral compass was easy.

I believe most parties need a moral compassa character to remind his or her adventuring companions that they're heroes, not villains. The moral compass urges the party to take the high road more often than not and also speaks to the importance of completing quests for the good of the realm. Without a moral compass to point them in the right direction, player characters are easily swayed by quests for treasure and personal power . . . not unlike some campaign villains we know. They also begin to forgo matters of decorum, knocking down knights, nobles, and political leaders like common rabble until everyone is beneath them.

A party needs a moral compass for no other reason than campaign stability. Campaigns centered on morally bankrupt characters tend to be fragile and easily shattered. The party might develop irreconcilable internal conflicts. *NACIME KHEMIS!* This could result in characters feeling alienated from the rest of the group. *CURT GOULD!* General apathy could also lead to character death. I'm pretty sure the Wednesday night group used to include a human fighter, until he floated away on a beholder and was basically abandoned by his friends. That probably wouldn't have happened on Rhasgar's watch. Just sayin'.

LESSONS LEARNED

Some moral compasses point north-by-east instead of north, if you know what I mean. A slightly off-kilter compass is better than none, I suppose. As a DM, you gotta take whatever you can get. With many groups, the compass just sort of spins around and around, like Captain Jack Sparrow's. The truth is, you can't force a player character to be the party's moral compassit just doesn't work. You need a character that's built for it, not to mention a thick-skinned player who's willing to be the good guy on occasion and say, "Uh, guys, is it cool to maim people we don't like?" *RODNEY THOMPSON!*

It's not the DM's job to be the party's moral compass. (The DM wears plenty of hats already, thank you very much.) However, in the absence of one, here are a couple little "rules" I use to keep my player characters headed in the right direction campaign-wise:

- In my campaign, a good deed goes unpunished.
- In my campaign, the low road is more dangerous than the high road.

Actually, they're more like *guidelines*. And they're meant to be applied subtly, not wielded like clubs.

For example, when my player characters show generosity, mercy, or forgiveness, I try very hard not to make them regret it later. If they spare the life of a villain, they'll be rewardedsomehow, in some way. It could be as simple as the villain never rearing his ugly head again, or even better, coming to the party's aid against a common threat. Maybe a simple act of compassion on their part causes some other NPC to view them in a favorable light. But I assure you, the villain won't turn around, slaughter a town full of innocent people, and write "Rhasgar was here!" on the dead mayor's forehead to frame the party.

The Wednesday night group caught the faint whiff of DM generosity when the heroes spared the life of a somewhat villainous eladrin girl who'd crossed their path. The characters bore her safely back to the Feywild and delivered her into the arms of her cold-hearted brother, an evil archfey. Granted, their reasons weren't entirely altruistic. Nevertheless, the deed earned the archfey's "undying gratitude," which hopefully will bode well for them in the future.

On the other hand, if a character has the gall to summon an archduke of the Nine Hells and cut a deal with him to raise the party's sunken ship from the ocean floor, or decides to get back at a troublesome island baroness by sinking her entire naval fleet, you can bet that act will come back to haunt the party six ways 'til Sunday. Not that I'm complaining, mind youmore grist for the mill, as they say.

Eventually, much to this DM's chagrin, Trevor will head back to Iowa, and the Wednesday night group will once again be without its moral compass. However, by applying two simple "guidelines" over and over, I can help my players navigate the campaign without one, never once governing their actions or telling them, "thou must do good!"

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

WHEDONISM

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. One of the main story arcs of the campaign is a war that has largely unfolded offscreen. The Myrthon Regency, which is part of the Dragovar Empire, has been invaded and enslaved by mind flayers in league with Allabar, an elder star entity. However, the main villain is an eladrin warlock named Starlord Evendor, who's using Allabar to free the other evil star powers (entities such as Acamar, Hadar, Caiphon, and Gibbeth) from their celestial prisons. The characters first heard mention of Evendor's name late in the heroic tier, but it wasn't until paragon tier that they became concerned with the war and began taking steps to depose Evendor. And it wasn't until epic tier that they commandeered an illithid nautiloid (an alien mind flayer ship) and crashed it into Starlord Evendor's tower observatory, thereby provoking a face-to-face meeting with the eladrin warlock. That encounter didn't go well for the party, but most of them escaped with their lives and minds intact.

Another confrontation with Starlord Evendor seemed inevitable. He was, arguably, the campaign's "Big Bad." However, the players weren't eager to go charging after him a second time, and so he faded into the background for several levels while the heroes went after villains who were more, shall we say, accessible. Then, out of nowhere, came the surprise announcement that Starlord Evendor had been captured by the Knights of Ardyn, an organization of NPCs dedicated to preserving

the Dragovar Empire. Ardyn, the group's silver dragon leader, contacted the heroes to let them know the surprising news, and they traveled to her island fortress to confront the villain.

The Knights of Ardyn needed the heroes' help to interrogate Evendor and determine the whereabouts of the missing Myrthon regent, whom they sought to rescue, but some of the heroes were determined to slay Evendor and pry the information from his corpse (using Speak with Dead rituals). Before Evendor could be slain, however, the true villain of the session appeared and revealed that Evendor, the heroes, and the Knights of Ardyn were pawns in a plot hatched by two dark and distant stars, Ulban and Nihal.

The session's "secret villain" was Melech, Bruce Cordell's former character. (When Bruce left the game, his character became an NPC.) As a tiefling star-pact warlock, Melech had received many visions from Ulban and Nihal over the course of the campaign, tracing all the way back to the early paragon tier. These evil star entities had also given Melech special powers, which he used quite willingly and often. Melech, played by Bruce as somewhat corruptible and a touch mad, was told that he would one day supplant Evendor and become a "Starlord" himself. That day had finally come.

After Bruce left the game, Melech transformed into a tiny mote of starlight that haunted the party from time to time when it suit him. He could enter the bodies of his companions and possess them, if they allowed it which they did, on occasion. Little could they know, however, that their final confrontation with Starlord Evendor was at hand. Unknown to everyone but Melech and Evendor, the stars Ulban and Nihal were in perfect celestial alignment with Iomandra and its sun. Melech intended to use this rare conjunction to forcibly transform several of the PCs into gigantic star-worms the Dread Spawn of Nihal and Ulban. To make it work, I decided that these party members had been born during similar alignments, and thus they were destined to become these horrific creatures. What made it work was Stan!'s new character, a dwarf Knight of Ardyn named Varghuum. The instant Stan! decided he wanted to play a Knight of Ardyn, it seemed natural that Varghuum would be the missing piece of puzzle. As one of Evendor's captors, he would be the final "sacrifice" to Nihal and Ulban.

Bound in chains, Evendor watched helplessly as Starlord Melech called upon Nihal and Ulban to transform Varghuum and three of the other PCs (played by Jeff Alvarez, Chris Dupuis, and Matt Sernett) into horrific star spawn. The resulting battle pitted PC against PC until, at last, Melech was put down. With his death, the alignment of stars was broken, and those who'd transformed into star-worms reverted to their natural forms, whereupon they lamented the death of poor Melech.

I have, in previous installments of this column, touched on writers whose work I find

inspirational. I've also made mention of episodic television series that have taught me how to be a better storyteller. However, I have yet to shine the spotlight on Joss Whedon, about whom essays and books have been written. He is, for those unfamiliar with the name, the creative force behind such TV series as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, not to mention the writer/director of this summer's mega-blockbuster, Marvel's *The Avengers*.

There are plenty of altars dedicated to the man already, so rather than bore you with fan-boy sycophancy, let me point out one thing that Joss does in his work that I've plundered and put to great use in my D&D campaign.

ONCE IN A WHILE, CHALLENGE THE PLAYERS' EXPECTATIONS.

I have this ongoing "meta-game" with my players, whereby I plan out my campaign and they try to anticipate how events will play out and plan accordingly. When they're feeling precocious, they also try to steer the campaign in directions that might be counter to what I have planned, just to see how well I improvise. This game-within-a-game is endlessly challenging and fun.

Anyone who studies Whedon's work can see how he dances with his audience before yanking the rug out from under them. I recall a scene in the middle of the third season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which the heroes are gathered in the high school library, planning their inevitable end-of-season confrontation with the evil Mayor Wilkins. Out of the blue, their meeting is interrupted by the villain himself. As a viewer, I was knocked off balance. Suddenly, I'm expecting a fight to break out. Then I'm surprised again when it doesn't happen. The whole scene catches one off guard.

Early in the same season, we see the introduction of Mayor Wilkins' right-hand man, a suave vampire named Mr. Trick. The audience is led to believe he'll be a major player in the unfolding season, and thus we're surprised when he gets dusted and supplanted by Faith, a rogue vampire slayer. We get another similar jolt in the fourth season, when the ruthless Professor Maggie Walsh meets a surprising end at the hands of Adam, her monstrous creation. Joss Whedon and his allies are never shy about killing off characters (even beloved ones) to shock the audience. No one, neither hero nor villain, is sacred.

As a DM, I try my best to anticipate what the player characters will do next, and what the likely outcomes of their actions and decisions might be. And then I try to find ways to surprise them not all the time, mind you, just when I think the campaign could use a little twist or spark of uncertainty. My Monday night group was holding off on the inevitable confrontation with Starlord Evendor, but the introduction of Stan!'s new character spurred me to drop Starlord Evendor into the party's lap. As an added twist, I made Starlord Evendor a non-threat, which is risky. It's not my normal inclination to have a group of NPCs subdue a major campaign villain, nor do I usually place my villains at such a disadvantage, but that's the point. I knew it would surprise my players. The party had already confronted Evendor once, and another exchange of firepower was exactly what they were expecting. But when I took a step back and asked how things might play out differently, I realized that I could wrap up Melech's storyline and Evendor's storyline in one fell swoop. That intrigued me much more than saving Evendor for the usual end-of-campaign tete-a-tete.

LESSONS LEARNED

Whedon is a master at shocking his audience, but that's not the only narrative trick or technique I've plucked from his large, juicy brain. Here are three other tried-and-true Whedonisms that I've stumbled across in my study of his work, which I'll only mention in passing as conversation starters:

- **Every characterhero, villain, or otherhas a little dork living inside him (or her).**
- **Every hero should be allowed to do cool stuff.**

- **Before you make your players cry, make them laugh.**

Each of these bullet points is practically an article in itself. Moreover, there are other things that I do as a DM which remind me of things Whedon does as a writer, most of which I've touched on in previous articles (particularly some of the earlier ones). One Whedonism I'm reluctant to try is having characters and NPCs break into song. If I had any songwriting or singing talent, that would be the fourth point on my list. But, alas, I'm no Joss Whedon, nor do I profess to know all of his storytelling secrets.

What Whedonisms have you embraced in your campaign? Inquiring minds want to know . . .

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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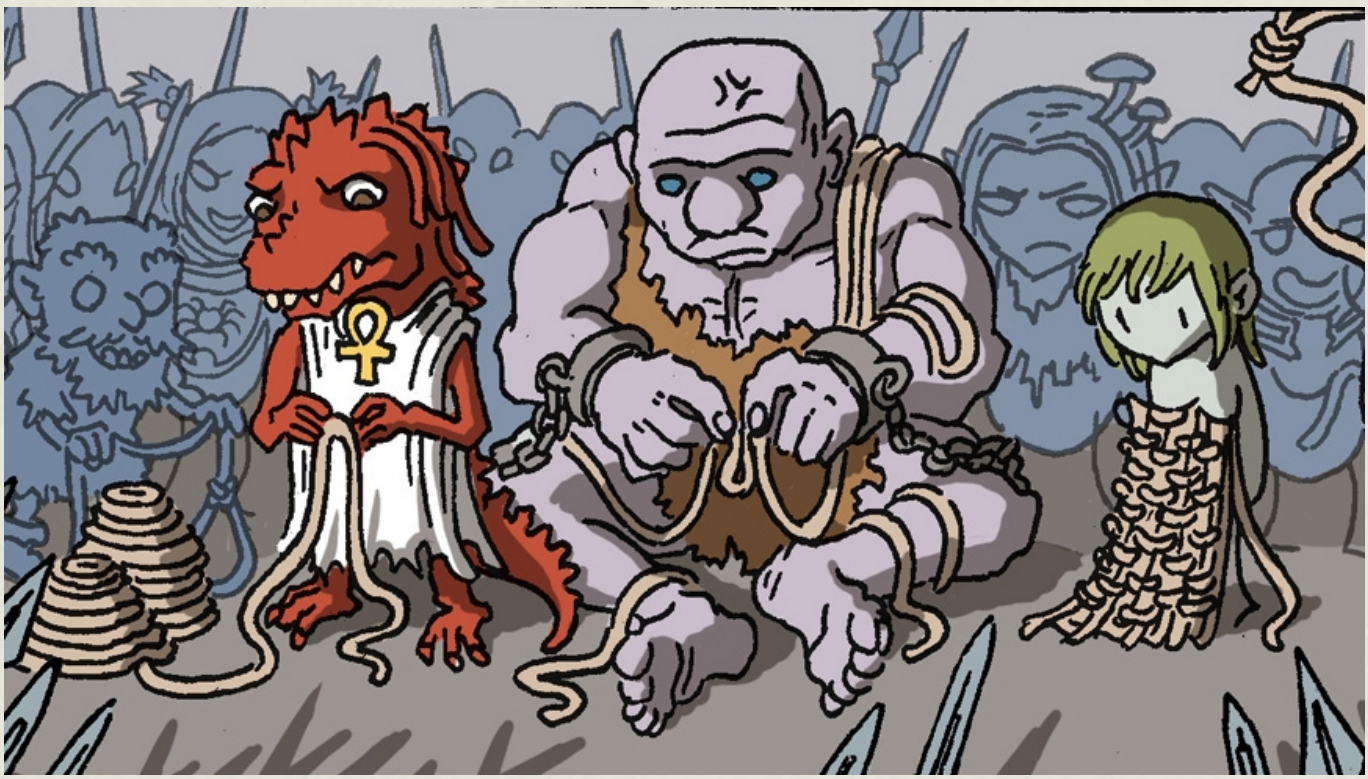


OUT OF THE ABYSS WALKTHROUGH POSTER
CARTOON - 11/26/2015
By Jason Thompson

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

A SUITE ALTERNATIVE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The heroes have declared war on the Magocracy of Vhalt, a secret kingdom of Vecna worshipers who haunt the skies of Iomandra in flying citadels guarded by warforged soldiers. One of these citadels has just attacked a ship in the party's fleet, and the heroes have no choice but to launch a counter-assault. It looks like they're in for one hell of a fight, too. Then, out of the blue, three renegade warforged arrive to lend the party a hand and deal a crushing blow to their evil Vhaltese masters. These warforged are played by special guest stars Jeff Alvarez (VP, Paizo Publishing), Brian R. James (of **Forgotten Realms** fame), and Richard Whitters (*Magic: The Gathering* senior concept illustrator). The following week, when Richard is unable to resume in his guest-starring role due to a last-minute scheduling conflict, he's replaced by Tom LaPille, one of our D&D and Magic game developers. Half way into the session, the Vhaltese lord of the citadel completes a ritual that subjugates two of the three warforged renegades, forcing them to turn on the party. Time for my special guest stars to go to town!

Even the most hardcore D&D player can feel daunted by the suite of options available to high-level characters. It's not so bad if you've been playing the same character for twenty-odd levels, because at least there's an element of familiarity that comes with

advancing a character. But jumping into the campaign with a new character can be intimidating, particularly for players who don't have the time or wherewithal to digest every rules element and nuance of the game system.

As I've mentioned before in a **previous article**, I like to invite "special guest stars" to my gaming table from time to timeplayers who aren't part of the regular group. Sometimes they play villains, but usually they play supporting characters that provide the party with extra resources and firepower. Sometimes they're hardcore D&D players, and sometimes they're casual players at best. (Personality, not rules knowledge, wins me over every time.) They rarely have time to create full-blown characters, and they have even less time to optimize them or to memorize complicated suites of powers and feats.

I try to ease my players' burdens by offering them alternatives to the standard character sheet, namely a tall glass of what I like to call "Character Lite." One way to create a simplified character is to avoid choosing complicated powers and feats, or to simply ignore them once chosen. However, the 4th Edition system offers a tempting alternative in the form of **companion characters**.

The rules for creating companion characters are nestled in the *Dungeon Master's Guide 2* (pages 27-33). You can create a companion character in a matter of minutes, and if you follow the rules to the letter, the end result is a simplified character with fewer options and poorer statistics than a standard character of the same level—an all-around weaker option. This is deliberate, since companion characters are meant to be used as NPC henchmen and followers to bolster smaller-than-average adventuring parties. They forgo the plethora of options for a handful of powers, and as a consequence they might seem underwhelming, but it sure makes them easy to run. And if that's not enough of an incentive, let me add that it doesn't take much effort to "pump up" a companion character if you really want to.

Switch to Monday night: After suffering through the experience of playing a fairly complicated 27th-level dragonborn rogue, Stan! shuddered at the notion of creating a brand-new epic-level character from scratch when poor **Baharoosh bit the dust**. Once he settled on a character concept that fit the party gestalt, I set about to create a companion character for him. Since Stan!'s not a power gamer, the prospect of playing a simple, straightforward character was very attractive to him. However, I didn't want Stan!'s new character to be feeble, either, so I compared his defenses and damage numbers to other characters and made some ad-hoc adjustments to guarantee that his dwarf paladin wouldn't get laughed out of the party. I also broke one of the rules of companion character design by applying magic item bonuses to his statistics.

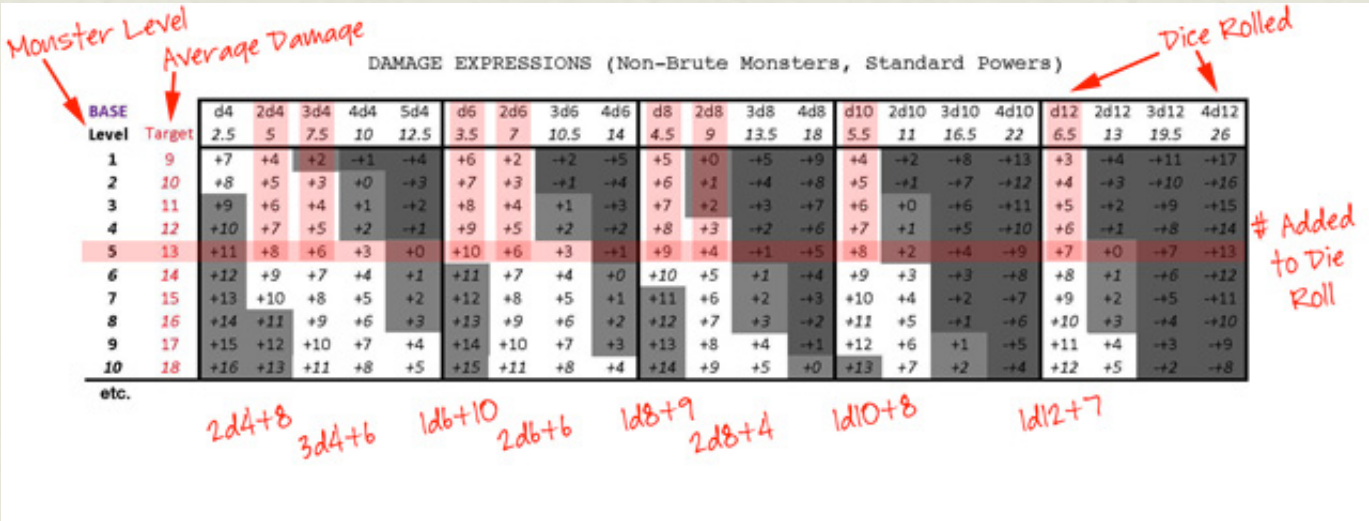
At the end of the companion character-building process, what you get is something that looks like a monster stat block, which, once you get used to it, is a fairly intuitive and easy way to present character information. Key statistics such as hit points, initiative modifier, and defenses are presented at the top, and all of the character's powers are organized by action typestandard actions first, triggered actions last. All I can say is after two weeks of practical use, Stan! isn't looking forward to going back to a standard character sheet any time soon.

My Wednesday night guest stars were handed stat blocks for their warforged characters at the start of the session. Before the game got underway, I took them aside and walked them through the stat block format, which proved fairly intuitive and easy to reference. Thankfully, I only needed to create one companion character to represent all three of them, since the three warforged were statistically identical. (What differentiated them were their personalities.) However, to make them a genuine threat when the time came for them to betray the party (as special guest stars often do!), they needed some statistical boosts. I gave them hit points and damage numbers commensurate with elite monsters of their level, which made them much more powerful and resilient than normal companion characters. The hit points were easy to calculate, the damage numbers less so. Fortunately, I have a spreadsheet that tells me how much damage a monster should deal on its turn based on its level and role (brutes have a higher damage scale than other monsters). Here's the spreadsheet I use:

- **Monster Damage by Level**

If you're a DM, you'll find this damage spreadsheet helpful if you like to create monsters on the fly. (In fact, I suggest you keep copies of this spreadsheet tucked away between the folds of your DM screen, in your campaign binder, or some other easy-to-reference location.)

Here's how the spreadsheet works: Imagine you're creating a level 5 skirmisher and want to know how much damage its basic attack should deal. Let's look at a snippet of the spreadsheet to find out:



BASE Level	Target	d4	2d4	3d4	4d4	5d4	d6	2d6	3d6	4d6	d8	2d8	3d8	4d8	d10	2d10	3d10	4d10	d12	2d12	3d12	4d12
		2.5	5	7.5	10	12.5	3.5	7	10.5	14	4.5	9	13.5	18	5.5	11	16.5	22	6.5	13	19.5	26
1	9	+7	+4	+2	+1	+4	+6	+2	+2	+5	+5	+0	+5	+9	+4	+2	+8	+13	+3	+4	+11	+17
2	10	+8	+5	+3	+0	+3	+7	+3	+1	+4	+6	+1	+4	+8	+5	+1	+7	+12	+4	+3	+10	+16
3	11	+9	+6	+4	+1	+2	+8	+4	+1	+3	+7	+2	+3	+7	+6	+0	+6	+11	+5	+2	+9	+15
4	12	+10	+7	+5	+2	+1	+9	+5	+2	+2	+8	+3	+2	+6	+7	+1	+5	+10	+6	+1	+8	+14
5	13	+11	+8	+6	+3	+0	+10	+6	+3	+1	+9	+4	+1	+5	+8	+2	+4	+9	+7	+0	+7	+13
6	14	+12	+9	+7	+4	+1	+11	+7	+4	+0	+10	+5	+1	+4	+9	+3	+3	+8	+8	+1	+6	+12
7	15	+13	+10	+8	+5	+2	+12	+8	+5	+1	+11	+6	+2	+3	+10	+4	+2	+7	+9	+2	+5	+11
8	16	+14	+11	+9	+6	+3	+13	+9	+6	+2	+12	+7	+3	+2	+11	+5	+1	+6	+10	+3	+4	+10
9	17	+15	+12	+10	+7	+4	+14	+10	+7	+3	+13	+8	+4	+1	+12	+6	+1	+5	+11	+4	+3	+9
10	18	+16	+13	+11	+8	+5	+15	+11	+8	+4	+14	+9	+5	+0	+13	+7	+2	+4	+12	+5	+2	+8
etc.																						

Click to enlarge

The average damage for a level 5 non-brute monster is 13 points. That's the amount of damage it should be dealing on its turn with an at-will (standard) attack. The spreadsheet provides several different damage expressions that yield the same average damage result: 2d4 + 8, 3d4 + 6, 1d6 + 10, 2d6 + 6, and so on. Simply choose whichever damage expression you prefer or makes the most sense. If you want the monster to attack multiple times on its turn, reduce the damage for each attack proportionately. For example, a level 5 skirmisher might deal 2d8 + 4 damage with a single longsword attack, or it could make two claw attacks for 1d8 + 2 damage each.

Either way, it's doing the right amount of damage for its level on its turn (average 13 points).

The spreadsheet doesn't provide damage expressions for elite or solo monsters. Elite monsters basically deal damage equal to two monsters of their level, and this damage is usually spread over two or more standard attacks. A solo monster is basically four standard monsters rolled into one.

Because my Wednesday night game includes several highly optimized characters, I inflated the warforged damage numbers even more than my spreadsheet allows, just to make them scary. It just goes to prove that all the rules, formulas, and spreadsheets in the world sometimes can't give you exactly what you need. That's where a little DM intuition and guesswork comes in handy.

LESSONS LEARNED

Do you have a player who finds the sheer number of character options overwhelming? If so, I urge you to experiment with the companion character rules in the *DMG2*. As with many tasks that fall upon the Dungeon Master, it's more than a simple mathematical exercise. There's a certain amount of art involved. I don't recommend lightweight characters for everyone, but if you have a player who's willing to trade a space shuttle for a hang glider, the companion character rules are a pretty good alternative to the multi-page character sheet.

What a companion character offers is well worth the effort it takes to create one, namely:

- **A streamlined character with fewer options**
- **A quick, ready-to-play experience**

However, here are two things to keep in mind when building a companion character using the rules in the *DMG2*:

- **Companion characters are, by design, weaker than regular characters.**
- **A few additional DM tweaks might be required to ensure player happiness.**

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

2 Shares Tweets 0 +

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

DIE, DM, DIE!

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The good-aligned Knights of Ardyn have captured the evil Starlord Evendor and are preparing to turn him over to the Dragovar Empire. This is a big deal for a couple reasons. First and foremost, Evendor has been trying to destroy the Dragovar Empire and the rest of the world since the start of the campaign, so making him answer for his crimes would give this particular campaign arc some closure. Secondly, the Knights of Ardyn have been propagandized as terrorists because they violently oppose corruption within the Dragovar Empire. By handing over Starlord Evendor to the Dragovar authorities, they can prove they are truly working in the empire's best interests.

The Knights of Ardyn arrange to have Starlord Evendor picked up and transported to the prison-island of Zardkarath. Unfortunately, the Dragovar warship that arrives is under the sway of doppelgangers loyal to Evendor, and the Knights are too blinded by the desire to improve their public image to imagine that security aboard the warship might be compromised. Fortunately, the heroes are here to set them straight. After learning of a doppelganger conspiracy to smuggle Starlord Evendor to safety, they arrive just as the prisoner transfer is concluded. When the warship captain refuses to return the prisoner, the heroes help the Knights of Ardyn take the warship by force. Things are complicated by the fact that many of the warship's defenders aren't even aware that their mission is a ruse. Even as

Starlord Evendor is sequestered below decks, these misguided dragonborn soldiers accuse the heroes and their alliesthe deceitful Knights of Ardynof showing their traitorous hearts. They call upon Bahamut to guide their weapons in the name of justice, and suddenly the forces of good find themselves in bloody conflict. Time to break out the dice!

In **last week's article**, I included a spreadsheet that outlines how much damage a monster of a given level and role should deal on its attacks. This reference, for example, tells me that a level 35 monster (non-brute) should be dealing an average of 43 damage with an at-will attack. The spreadsheet also provides different dice expressions to achieve such as result (4d8 + 25, 3d10 + 27, 2d12 + 30, and so on). When creating new monsters for my campaign or for published adventures, it's a fantastic reference. Dry as a 5,000-year-old mummy lord wrapped in sandpaper, yet fantastic all the same. I keep a copy of the spreadsheet in my campaign binder. However, I use it differently when I'm behind the DM screen.

What I'm about to say might be viewed as heretical, and it might even fly in the face of your own sensibilities as a D&D player and Dungeon Master, but I'll say it anyway: *(deep breath)* As much as I like rolling dice to achieve random results, as a DM working behind the screen, I prefer to roll as few dice as possible. In fact, I usually keep only **two dice** behind my screen. That's two dice *total*.

The first die is, of course, a d20 . . . for obvious reasons.

The second die is usually a d6. (Sometimes it's whatever random non-d20 die I pull out of my velvet dice bag or, on occasions what I forget my dice, whatever die I happen to have in my pocket or in my minis storage tray.) If I'm running an encounter with brute monsters, I'll sometimes double up on the second die and grab a pair of d6's. However, two dice is the norm.

Two dice behind the DM screen, you say?

Why the heck not. I know how much damage (on average) a monster's supposed to deal I have a spreadsheet that tells me (with numbers derived from a fairly straightforward formula). Should my players care that I'm rolling 1d6 + 25 instead of 4d8 + 10, like the *Monster Manual* says I should? Why should they care? The only measurable difference is a narrower damage range with results edging closer to the average (26-31 damage instead of 14-42 damage), and my players have more important things to worry about than whether or not a monster's damage range is wide enough.

Here are truncated versions of the spreadsheet I shared last week:

DAMAGE TABLES FOR NON-BRUTES (1D6 + X)

Non-Brute At-Will Attacks d6

Level	Avg	d6 3.5	2d6 7	3d6 10.5	4d6 14
1	9	+6	+2	-+2	-+5
2	10	+7	+3	-+1	-+4
3	11	+8	+4	+1	-+3
4	12	+9	+5	+2	-+2
5	13	+10	+6	+3	-+1
6	14	+11	+7	+4	+0
7	15	+12	+8	+5	+1
8	16	+13	+9	+6	+2
9	17	+14	+10	+7	+3
10	18	+15	+11	+8	+4
11	19	+16	+12	+9	+5
12	20	+17	+13	+10	+6
13	21	+18	+14	+11	+7
14	22	+19	+15	+12	+8
15	23	+20	+16	+13	+9
16	24	+21	+17	+14	+10
17	25	+22	+18	+15	+11
18	26	+23	+19	+16	+12
19	27	+24	+20	+17	+13
20	28	+25	+21	+18	+14
21	29	+26	+22	+19	+15
22	30	+27	+23	+20	+16
23	31	+28	+24	+21	+17
24	32	+29	+25	+22	+18
25	33	+30	+26	+23	+19
26	34	+31	+27	+24	+20
27	35	+32	+28	+25	+21
28	36	+33	+29	+26	+22
29	37	+34	+30	+27	+23
30	38	+35	+31	+28	+24
31	39	+36	+32	+29	+25
32	40	+37	+33	+30	+26
33	41	+38	+34	+31	+27
34	42	+39	+35	+32	+28
35	43	+40	+36	+33	+29

Non-Brute Encounter Attacks d6

Level	Avg	d6 3.5	2d6 7	3d6 10.5	4d6 14
1	13.5	+10	+7	+3	-+1
2	15	+12	+8	+5	+1
3	16.5	+13	+10	+6	+3
4	18	+15	+11	+8	+4
5	19.5	+16	+13	+9	+6
6	21	+18	+14	+11	+7
7	22.5	+19	+16	+12	+9
8	24	+21	+17	+14	+10
9	25.5	+22	+19	+15	+12
10	27	+24	+20	+17	+13
11	28.5	+25	+22	+18	+15
12	30	+27	+23	+20	+16
13	31.5	+28	+25	+21	+18
14	33	+30	+26	+23	+19
15	34.5	+31	+28	+24	+21
16	36	+33	+29	+26	+22
17	37.5	+34	+31	+27	+24
18	39	+36	+32	+29	+25
19	40.5	+37	+34	+30	+27
20	42	+39	+35	+32	+28
21	43.5	+40	+37	+33	+30
22	45	+42	+38	+35	+31
23	46.5	+43	+40	+36	+33
24	48	+45	+41	+38	+34
25	49.5	+46	+43	+39	+36
26	51	+48	+44	+41	+37
27	52.5	+49	+46	+42	+39
28	54	+51	+47	+44	+40
29	55.5	+52	+49	+45	+42
30	57	+54	+50	+47	+43
31	58.5	+55	+52	+48	+45
32	60	+57	+53	+50	+46
33	61.5	+58	+55	+51	+48
34	63	+60	+56	+53	+49
35	64.5	+61	+58	+54	+51

DAMAGE TABLES FOR BRUTES (2D6 + X)

Non-Brute At-Will Attacks 2d6

Level	Avg	2d6	3d6	4d6
		7	*10.5*	*14*
1	11.25	+4	+1	-+3
2	12.5	*+6*	*+2*	*-+2*
3	13.75	+7	+3	+0
4	15	*+8*	*+5*	*+1*
5	16.25	+9	+6	+2
6	17.5	*+11*	*+7*	*+4*
7	18.75	+12	+8	+5
8	20	*+13*	*+10*	*+6*
9	21.25	+14	+11	+7
10	22.5	*+16*	*+12*	*+9*
11	23.75	+17	+13	+10
12	25	*+18*	*+15*	*+11*
13	26.25	+19	+16	+12
14	27.5	*+21*	*+17*	*+14*
15	28.75	+22	+18	+15
16	30	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
17	31.25	+24	+21	+17
18	32.5	*+26*	*+22*	*+19*
19	33.75	+27	+23	+20
20	35	*+28*	*+25*	*+21*
21	36.25	+29	+26	+22
22	37.5	*+31*	*+27*	*+24*
23	38.75	+32	+28	+25
24	40	*+33*	*+30*	*+26*
25	41.25	+34	+31	+27
26	42.5	*+36*	*+32*	*+29*
27	43.75	+37	+33	+30
28	45	*+38*	*+35*	*+31*
29	46.25	+39	+36	+32
30	47.5	*+41*	*+37*	*+34*
31	48.75	+42	+38	+35
32	50	*+43*	*+40*	*+36*
33	51.25	+44	+41	+37
34	52.5	*+46*	*+42*	*+39*
35	53.75	+47	+43	+40

Non-Brute Encounter Attacks 2d6

Level	Avg	2d6	3d6	4d6
		7	*10.5*	*14*
1	16.875	+10	+6	+3
2	18.75	*+12*	*+8*	*+5*
3	20.625	+14	+10	+7
4	22.5	*+16*	*+12*	*+9*
5	24.375	+17	+14	+10
6	26.25	*+19*	*+16*	*+12*
7	28.125	+21	+18	+14
8	30	*+23*	*+20*	*+16*
9	31.875	+25	+21	+18
10	33.75	*+27*	*+23*	*+20*
11	35.625	+29	+25	+22
12	37.5	*+31*	*+27*	*+24*
13	39.375	+32	+29	+25
14	41.25	*+34*	*+31*	*+27*
15	43.125	+36	+33	+29
16	45	*+38*	*+35*	*+31*
17	46.875	+40	+36	+33
18	48.75	*+42*	*+38*	*+35*
19	50.625	+44	+40	+37
20	52.5	*+46*	*+42*	*+39*
21	54.375	+47	+44	+40
22	56.25	*+49*	*+46*	*+42*
23	58.125	+51	+48	+44
24	60	*+53*	*+50*	*+46*
25	61.875	+55	+51	+48
26	63.75	*+57*	*+53*	*+50*
27	65.625	+59	+55	+52
28	67.5	*+61*	*+57*	*+54*
29	69.375	+62	+59	+55
30	71.25	*+64*	*+61*	*+57*
31	73.125	+66	+63	+59
32	75	*+68*	*+65*	*+61*
33	76.875	+70	+66	+63
34	78.75	*+72*	*+68*	*+65*
35	80.625	+74	+70	+67

The numbers highlighted in yellow tell me what to add to my d6 (or 2d6) rolls when dealing damage for monsters. For example, in my game, a level 35 monster (non-brute) deals 1d6 + 40 damage with an at-will power on a hit, not 4d8 + 25, 3d10 + 27, or 2d12 + 30. It saves me a few seconds of dice collecting and additiona few precious

seconds that are better spent thinking about the game, as opposed to practicing my math skills or testing my players' patience.

At the point where I'm rolling a single die for damage, one might ask, "Why bother rolling dice at all? Why not simply take the average every time?" Valid question, but a little damage variability is a good thing; otherwise, players might start meta-gaming. For example, if Player X knows that my hill giant is dealing 27 damage every round and his character has 28 hit points remaining, then Player X also knows that the giant won't pound his character into mulch with one swing . . . and I'd rather Player X not play that game.

LESSONS LEARNED

There's something to be said for picking up a handful of dice and letting them tumble like an avalanche behind the DM screen. It can startle and horrify your players, particularly when they're not accustomed to the sound, and that's worth doing once in a while for the cheap, sadistic thrill. However, I'm not the kind of DM who likes rolling and adding up small piles of dice after every attack. I already spend a great deal of behind-the-screen time subtracting hit points and tracking conditions, so I seize every opportunity to minimize the extra math. One way to accomplish my goal is to reduce the number of dice I need to roll to achieve the desired effect.

If all I have behind the DM screen is a d20 and a d6 (or 2d6 for brutes), I can focus on the more important aspects of Dungeon Mastering: figuring out what my monsters and NPCs will do next, dreaming up witty retorts in response to something a player just said, or thinking of some wonderful complication that will make my players rethink their tactics.

So, when it comes to dice behind the screen, here's my philosophy:

- **D&D is all about the dice. To quote Rodney Thompson, D&D without dice is like jazz without saxophones.**
- **The quality of a DM is not measured by the number of dice he or she rolls.**
- **A DM has more important things to do besides math. The less time it takes, the better.**

Do I feel bad about leaving my d4's, d8's, d10's, and d12's in the dice bag? Not really. I try to imagine that they're all have a big party in there, and I still bust them out whenever I'm sitting on the *other* side of the DM screen. And let me be perfectly clear: I am a dice man, *coo-coo-coo-choo*. But I'm also lazy, busy, and pragmatic. If I have a choice between rolling 3d10 + 11 damage or 1d6 + 24 damage, I'll take the single die and the big modifier. It seems like an insignificant thing, but it's the kind of no-brainer shortcut that keeps overworked DMs like me alive and kickin'.

Until the next encounter!

ARTICLE

WHAT'S MY MOTIVATION?

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. No game this past week, sadly. As happens occasionally, I had a scheduling conflict that couldn't be reconciled any other way. However, the evening wasn't a complete loss.

Andrew Finch, who plays Ravok the Mindhammer (a 29th-level goliath battlemind), had sent me an email that I'd been putting off answering . . . mostly because it required a thoughtful response, and I hadn't been feeling very thoughtful. With the campaign drawing to a close, Andrew was searching for something to justify his character's continued involvement in the story. Ravok, who entered the campaign late in the game, had positioned himself as a psionically endowed crusader against a growing mind flayer threat. Now that the mind flayers have been eradicated (they were killed off by a psychic pulse triggered when the heroes killed the elder star spawn Allabar), Ravok's lost some of his motivation. True, there are other campaign threats to be squashed, but none of them resonate as personally.

Although Andrew has a well-earned reputation for being a power-gamer and min-maxer, he, like many of my players, is just as concerned with character development as raw statistics. Yes, it's nice to play a powerful and effective character, but if the character doesn't have a specific need to be fulfilled or a deep-rooted place in the unfolding story, it's hardly worth playing at all.

Breathing life into a D&D player character is the player's job, but keeping the character motivated and relevant is something the DM and player hash out together. It's a little bit like developing a television character. In television, you hire an actor to become a character, and once an actor is comfortable wearing that character's skin, the character takes on a life of its own. However, when the character is being underserved or its purpose called into question, the actor will often turn to the show's writers for ideas. Working together, the writers and actor can find new and clever ways to tie the character into whatever else is happening in the show.

In my Wednesday night campaign, Starlord Evendor is a crazy eladrin warlock NPC determined to free the evil star powers from their celestial prisons and summon them to the world (which would be bad). Until recently, the mind flayers were helping Evendor fulfill his mad desire, but now that they're gone, he's pretty much on his own. Ravok the Mindhammer knows that Starlord Evendor needs to be put down for the good of Iomandra, but for him, it's not personal. Andrew's email suggested that he wanted it to be personal. He wanted Ravok to be more connected to the story somehow. He wanted Starlord Evendor to be more to Ravok than just another world-destroying sack-o'-XP to be pounded into oblivion.

Here's what Andrew proposed to me, in a nutshell:

> I like the idea that psionics are nature's reaction to aberrations (like antibodies, if you will). Maybe Ravok had some event in his history that awakened his mind. This might be something as simple as an encounter with some aberrations as a child or adolescent, or it might be something more involved than that.

A campaign world belongs as much to the players as it does to the DM. Therefore, whenever a player begins to dream up new ways for his character to become more fully immersed in the setting, it's incumbent upon the Dungeon Master to help the player integrate his ideas into the campaign's gestalt. The end result of this collaboration is a richer, deeper play experience.

After giving Andrew's email some thought, here's what I wrote back to him:

> Ravok's reason for wanting to destroy Evendor is the same as everyone else's: to protect the world from catastrophe. However, the question of how he gained his psionic power is an interesting one. Here's one idea:
>
> When Ravok was a goliath boy, he and several other youths were taken to a henge a circle of stones erected by the tribe's goliath ancestors atop a mountain. The

tribal elder told Ravok and his young friends about the henge's ancient builders and its power to chart and predict celestial events. Whereas the other goliath children showed little interest in the henge (they were more interested in their youthful contests), Ravok felt drawn to it. For several nights, he returned to the henge on his own and watched the stars. One night, he saw something . . . a flash in the sky. Maybe it was a star burning out, and maybe the star's death imbued Ravok with a glimmer of its power. Conversely, Ravok might have seen Starlord Evendor himself standing in the middle of the henge, using the circle to commune with distant star powers. (Evendor, being an eladrin, wouldn't have aged dramatically in the intervening years.) Evendor might have spotted the young Ravok and done something to make him forget what he'd seen, and one of the consequences of that "attack" was that it awakened the young goliath's latent psionic ability. You could also say that the ancient henge is where Ravok goes to gain "clarity." Whenever he visits the henge and spends the night, he gains mysterious insight into what he needs to do next. Perhaps he's visited the site on many occasions over the course of his adventuring career, and maybe the time's come for him to return once more.

Most television screenwriters aren't required to consult with paid actors when it comes to character development, although the smart ones embrace a more collaborative experience, allowing the actors to help shape their characters' roles and destinies. By comparison, a DM doesn't really have carte blanche to add background material to a player character without the player's consent. Thus, my email isn't framed as a dictum. Instead, it strives to take the idea that Andrew proposed (a childhood event triggering Ravok's psionic "awakening") and build on it. Ultimately, Andrew will decide whether my idea is a good fit. He might even develop the idea further and come up with his own version. Whatever he decides, Ravok will be a more interesting character to play.

Ultimately, I want Andrew to be happy playing his character, and even though we're one level away from wrapping up the campaign, his desire to "root" Ravok in the unfolding storyline is no less important now than if he'd asked the same question ten levels ago.

I can't tell you where the idea of the mountaintop henge came from, except to say that the Starlord Evendor storyline has an overarching astronomical theme, and the ancient henges of Earth have always fascinated me. I try to present my players with ideas that spur adventures. If Ravok decides to return to the henge seeking guidance, I can plan an encounter or two around his "homecoming" and let the henge play a pivotal role in Ravok's character development.

LESSONS LEARNED

D&D players often find themselves torn between what's important to the adventuring party (and the campaign as a whole), and what's important to their character in particular. Saving the world is good for everyone, and it's certainly an accomplishment worthy of song, but does it leave the characters feeling fulfilled? Not necessarily. Every character's motivation is different, and the extent to which a character feels personally connected to the plot is important to many players.

It's one thing for Ravok the Mindhammer to save the world (with a little help from his puny friends). It's another thing to simultaneously confront the villain who inadvertently turned Ravok into a psionic weapon. It's ironic. It's personal. And it makes the final conflict that much sweeter.

In a deeply immersive and multilayered campaign, it's easy for player characters to become submerged in the unfolding story. Sometimes I need to remind myself that the campaign serves the characters, not the other way around. Thus, when a player takes strides to bring his or her character to the surface, I do my best to help, and sometimes it's a real test of my improvisational skills. The "DM as Motivator" role doesn't come up all the time, but it's no less important than any other DM role.

When a player asks for my help to root his or her character more firmly in the campaign, I try to keep the following things in mind:

- **Build on what the player gives you.**
- **Be willing to take your campaign in new directions.**
- **Suggest ideas that have future adventure possibilities.**

Hopefully the player will like your suggestions, but if not, that's okay too. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

In his quest to unlock Ravok's motivation, Andrew reminded me that the Iomandra campaign like any unfolding drama is as much about character as plot. A few DMs get locked into telling *their* stories, and they resist shaping their campaigns around the desires of their players and the motivations of their characters. However, it's been my experience that some of the best adventures and adventure ideas come from players exploring their character's deeper motivations, and such pursuits in turn motivate me to create a more immersive and entertaining campaign.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

THE WELL

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Matt Sernett plays Bartho, a human fighter with little ambition or drive. For most of the campaign, Bartho has gone where the action is, happy to follow rather than lead. A few sessions ago, in a particularly climactic battle, Bartho not only witnessed the death of his childhood friend Melech (Bruce Cordell's former character) but also played an unwilling part in it. He had been polymorphed into a giant wormlike creature and actually swallowed Melech whole. That by itself didn't spell Melech's doom, but it had a profound impact on Bartho. It hearkened back to a childhood event I'd concocted many levels ago to explain, in simple terms, the relationship between these two characters.

Melech was always getting into trouble and, on one occasion, had climbed down a village well. Far more cautious and timid, Bartho refused to follow him. When Melech was unable to climb back out, he called to Bartho to fetch a rope. Instead, Bartho panicked and ran away, leaving his friend trapped in the well (for a while, at least). This event would be reflected later in their adventuring careers. Melech would blunder into danger, and Bartho would follow until things turned dire, at which point he would flee, much to Melech's chagrin. Now that Melech's gone, Bartho's snapped. Not only has he lost his rudder and his impetus to go on

adventures but also he's succumbed to murderous bloodlust after twenty-seven levels of continuous slaughter. In a bold move, Matt's using Melech's death as a diving board and cast Bartho into a deep, drowning sea of madness.

Last session, some doppelgangers conspired to liberate a major campaign villain who'd been captured a couple sessions earlier. While the rest of the heroes tried to prevent the villain's escape, Bartho confronted and killed a doppelganger that had assumed Bartho's appearance. The tÃªte-a-tÃªte ended underwater, off the coast of an island called Ardynrise. Realizing that his bloodlust could not be quenched, Bartho found himself staring at his own dead self and, rather than rejoin his friends, elected to remain underwater until his air ran out.

One could argue that any good story regardless of the medium through which it unfolds needs to relate to its human audience. It tugs at certain themes that define the whole of human existence, including friendship, adversity, family, solitude, happiness, unhappiness, life, and death. It is through character, setting, comedy, and drama that these themes manifest and collide.

One of the most gratifying aspects of watching a D&D campaign unfold is seeing how a character that began as a concept built around a conglomeration of statistics can evolve into something more, be it a brilliant caricature or a fully realized character with as much depth as anyone real or imagined. When it happens, you start to really care about what happens to the characters and where the campaign is heading. As the Dungeon Master, I can "steer the ship" a little, but the players and the dice have just as much control. Bartho is one of the few characters who's been around since the very start of the campaign, and if you'd asked me what his ultimate fate might be back when the campaign was young, I would've guessed he might have gone the way of many frontline fighters, which is to say, he'd probably be eaten by a dragon somewhere in the paragon tier. I could not have imagined that Bartho would end up in a much darker place than a dragon's stomach, literally drowning his sorrow.

In the real world, there are people who are risk-takers and people who are risk-averse and people can switch from one to the other depending on the magnitude of the risk and their current disposition. But all things being normal in today's day and age, I think it's safe to say that most people err toward being "risk-averse." The same thing could be said for D&D player characters. Many players are loath to risk characters they care about (as opposed to characters created for "one-off" games such as Lair Assault challenges or *Tomb of Horrors*-style slaughterfests). Others are quite willing to throw their beloved characters into deadly peril. So what if a character dies? At best, it'll be a memorable tale to be told at conventions and throughout Internet forums and chat rooms. It might even pave the way for a new character with greater potential. At worst, it'll be an ignoble end to a character best forgotten. Either way, in the mind's eye of the risk-taking player, there are plenty more characters where that one came from!

I am struck by how my Monday night players handle the upper epic tier. Most of them are just as protective and risk-averse as they were at low heroic tier even the ones who are on their second, third, or fourth characters. I suspect they, having come this far, want to see their characters reach the very end . . . to neatly wrap up whatever character arcs are outstanding. They don't want their characters killed off with so few sessions remaining, and they certainly aren't keen on rolling up all-new epic-level characters with so little time left to develop their personalities.

Matt is bucking the trend with Bartho. In the "early years," he would've fled the battlefield before risking death (and did on multiple occasions). However, recent campaign events have awakened in Bartho some disturbing revelations, as well as given Bartho his most dominant storyline since the campaign's inception more than four years ago. Up until now, everything that needed to be said about Bartho could be written in big letters on the front of his shield. No longer. Out of nowhere, he's become infinitely more complex . . . and disturbing. Had events played out differently had Bruce not left the game, had I not lured the characters in a certain direction, had Bartho not been transformed into a giant worm Bartho might never have reached this grim (yet entertaining) nadir in his adventuring career. What does this mean? Will Bartho be "written out" of the story two-and-a-half levels before the campaign's expected end? Is Matt cool with that? Am I cool with that? Is Matt expecting me to contrive some other event that will push Bartho beyond his despair, or does he have something else in mind he's not telling me?

One of the greatest aspects of a D&D campaign, for me personally, is the romance of it all. Sometimes the romance is brief, and sometimes it endures for years. A DM needs some level of romantic attachment to his or her campaign to sustain it. The players need to feel that romance as well. When the romance is over, the campaign is over. That's why some players choose to leave, and though I can take steps to help keep the romance alive, different people fall out of love with a campaign for different reasons (or they fall in love with something else against which the campaign cannot rightfully compete). A DM must expect and honor that. Maybe Matt's tired of playing a complicated epic-level character. Maybe four years of playing the same character is enough. Maybe he'd rather spend his Monday nights with his daughter than coming to grips with Bartho's sad purpose in life. Or maybe, like me, he just wants to see where this latest character development will lead . . . or how much deeper his character can sink.

LESSONS LEARNED

Regardless of Matt's intentions and desires concerning Bartho, my job as the DM is to conjure stories and character development opportunities out of the ether, and put them before the players to be judged as worthy or unworthy of their attention. My campaign is strewn with the flotsam and jetsam of stories and adventure hooks that weren't picked up by anyone. But the DM is a bottomless well of ideas. That is why, regardless of Matt's plans for Bartho, I've hatched a scheme to keep him in the campaign a little bit longer. Whether Bartho bites the hook or not isn't really up to me, but bait him I will. Because that's what the DM does.

When last we left poor, unhinged Bartho, he was sitting on the bottom of the sea, staring at the lifeless corpse of his dead doppelganger, counting the rounds until he runs out of air and has to start making Endurance checks if he wants to live. His adventuring companions are out of sight a half-mile way, fighting a pitched battle on a fleeing Dragovar warship. But all is not what it seems. If what the characters were told is true, then there's still one doppelganger roaming around unchecked, and by the sheer simple fact that Bartho is by himself, he's the only one who can stop it. Out of the inky depths, a small submersible shaped like an eye of the deep (an aquatic beholder with pincer claws) approaches, on its way to a fateful rendezvous that could change the course of the campaign. Will this mysterious arrival draw Bartho up from the depths to investigate? I guess we'll find out next week!

Speaking of next week . . . some community feedback on recent articles has prompted me to share some campaign-ending tips in next week's column. If you think my Monday night players have it rough, wait until you see what I have in store for my Wednesday night group.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

THE END IS NIGH

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. A few sessions ago, the Raven Queen summoned Vargas (played by Rodney Thompson) to her domain in the Shadowfell and charged him with one "final" quest: the destruction of the warforged. You see, in my campaign the warforged aren't living constructs. They're *unliving* constructs, animated by the souls of the dead, which are abducted en route to the afterlife by agents of Vecna. The Raven Queen doesn't expect Vargas to destroy the warforged one at a time, of course. Instead, she sets him on a course to wipe them all out at once, first by urging Vargas to "seek out the walking dead that does not speak." This clue leads Vargas to Anchor, a mute warforged plucked from the bottom of the sea and currently residing aboard the party's ship. It turns out that Anchor holds the key to finding one of the *necroforges* where the warforged are built and animated, and (ironically) this warforged becomes the instrument of his race's destruction by aiding Vargas in the fulfillment of the Raven Queen's quest.

Anchor helps Vargas construct a teleportation circle to the *necroforge* where he was built, on the island of Zaarnath deep inside the Black Curtain a dangerous region where traditional healing magic doesn't function (rather like the Mournland in the Eberron campaign setting). However, Vargas isn't the only party member keen on visiting Zaarnath. The party's warforged character, Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis), has spent much of the campaign searching for answers to

important questions, such as who built him and why. The truth lies with Klytus Zandrau, a human wizard residing on Zaarnath. Fleet hopes that Zandrau will help him free the warforged from Vecna's tyranny. Fleet wants his fellow warforged to abandon their destructive cause, live in peace with the other races of Iomandra, and discover what it means to feel alive. He's about to learn that his buddy Vargas has a different calling.

The Mayans believed that 2012 marks the end of one world and the beginning of another. I can relate. As the Wednesday night group closes in on 30th level, the time has come to batten down the hatches and make final preparations to end my five-year campaign . . . and free up precious mind-space that can be put toward the next world, whatever it might be.

The extent to which a DM needs to "plan" for the end of the campaign depends on the campaign. For example, if I'm running a published Adventure Path such as *Scales of War* or *Age of Worms*, or a campaign based around a published mega-adventure the likes of *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* or *Return to the Tomb of Horrors*, I don't need to do a whole lot of planning because the campaign's destiny is pretty much written in ink. However, there might be a few loose character threads to tie up, particularly if I've given the player characters room to develop beyond the confines of the written campaign setting. In a more fluid campaign such as Iomandra, where the events are largely character driven and the climax isn't preordained, planning for "the big finish" is far more crucial.

It's too early to predict when exactly the Wednesday night campaign will end. I would venture to guess that the game has about ten sessions remaining, give or take a session. My mission, then, is to determine what needs to be crammed into the thirty or so precious hours that remain. I've walked this road before, but the last time was over five years ago (and here I'm speaking of my 3rd-edition Arveniar campaign, which now seems like ancient history). My end-of-campaign planning tips, some of which I'm about to share with you, stem mostly from that experience and from various campaign-ending experiences before that. Take them with a sprinkling of pixie dust.

LESSONS LEARNED

My Wednesday night players would be unhappy if the campaign ended before Vargas and Fleet reconciled their opposing quests, or if Xanthum (played by Curt Gould) didn't get sweet revenge for his six-year imprisonment in the Nine Hells, or if Deimos (played by Chris Youngs) didn't get to take his supercharged flagship into one final, glorious battle and solidify his candidacy for supreme Sea King of Iomandra. When it comes to "paying off" the campaign, my goals are shockingly simple:

- **Deliver on the players' expectations.**
- **Add some things the players won't expect.**

It's not enough to end the campaign in a manner that the players expect. I also need to weave in a few surprises as well, but I'll get to that in a moment.

After almost five years and thirty levels of game play, I have what I *believe* is a fairly clear picture of my players' expectations. In fact, I think my players' expectations are similar to your players' expectations, and indeed, every D&D group's expectations. I would summarize these expectations as follows:

- **Bring the major campaign arcs to a fulfilling end.**
- **Bring each character's arc to a fulfilling end.**

My first step in plotting the end of the campaign is to remember its major story arcs. They are, after all, the lighthouses that keep the campaign from running aground or slamming into the rocks.

My campaigns tend to have three major campaign arcs, for reasons **discussed here**. It's time to consider how far along these arcs have come and the extent to which I want them resolved. I don't think every arc needs to be fully resolved, let alone resolved in a similar fashion. For example, not every arc needs to culminate in a world-shaking clash of swords and hit points, with the bloodied heroes standing over the dismembered carcass of some immensely powerful villain the likes of Tiamat, Kyuss, or Third Demon Prince from the Left. (Still, this being D&D an' all, it's nice if at least one arc ends in bloodshed.)

THE CAMPAIGN ARCS

Here, you may recall, are the campaign arcs I need to wrap up in some fashion:

> **Campaign Arc #1: A Far Realm incursion ignites a war that threatens to wipe out the Dragovar Empire.** As it happens, this arc is 99% done. The Far Realm incursion was crushed when the heroes killed the elder starspawn Allabar, whose death triggered a psychic shockwave that killed *every last mind flayer* on the planet. Only one piece of unfinished business remains: the defeat or capture of Starlord Evendor, a mad eladrin warlock who triggered the Far Realm incursion to begin with.
>
> **Campaign Arc #2: A secret kingdom of Vecna worshipers lurks beyond the Black Curtain, poised to unleash an army of warforged powered by dead souls.** This arc, neglected for much of the campaign, gained a lot of momentum in the epic tier and is playing out nicely. The secret kingdom of Vhalt isn't irredeemably evil, and there's hope (among some of my players, anyway) that the Vhaltese wizards in charge can be brought to heel once their warforged army is neatly dispatched. Recently, I added a few complications to this storyline by tying the Vhaltese threat to a pair of recurring villains named **Kharl and Nemencia**, who are collectively the bane of the Wednesday night group's existence.
>
> **Campaign Arc #3: The mercantile Sea Kings vie for financial superiority in a war-torn world.** This final arc is well on its way toward a resolution of some kind, though as yet I know not what. Two of the

characters are Sea Kings with mercantile fleets under their command, and together they have united most of the Sea Kings against a common enemy (see Campaign Arc #1 above). Once the common enemy no longer poses a threat, the question becomes whether the alliance will hold. One constant thorn in the party's side is Sea King Senestrago, who not only refuses to join the Sea King alliance but threatens to undermine it at every turn. Some kind of resolution involving him seems inevitable, although maybe not the sort of resolution the players have in mind. Here is where I might surprise them.

THE CHARACTER ARCS

NOTE TO MY WEDNESDAY NIGHT PLAYERS: The remainder of this article contains major campaign spoilers. Read at your own risk.

Just as important as the campaign arcs are the individual character arcs that still need to be resolved. With a very large group of player characters, resolving every single character arc might be too great a chore even for a seasoned DM, but one can aspire toward that lofty goal. Fortunately, my Wednesday night group includes only five full-time player characters and one recurring **special guest star**, which I find to be a manageable size. (My Monday night group is slightly bigger.)

Although I've witnessed notable exceptions, I think most players want their characters to survive the campaign. Consequently, I try to ignore the imp perched on

my left shoulder, urging me to concoct fiendishly ironic or fitting ways to kill them off. I'm not directing a slasher flick, after all. Whereas I'm well within my right to deal with campaign arcs as I please, character arcs require more care. They beg for a satisfying conclusion. Granted, a character might perish suddenly and unexpectedly for any number of reasons tied to the plot or otherwise, but at this point in the campaign, I think it's healthy and wise for the DM to imagine that all of the current party members will be around for the final session. Besides, it would be a shame (not to mention bad practice) to leave a particular character dilemma unresolved.

With scant few game sessions remaining, I find it helpful to imagine a fun, fitting end for each character. More specifically, I try to think of the ONE THING (or things, although one thing is easier to accomplish than several at this point in the campaign) that will give each player character a proper sense of closure. Here are the major character arcs for my Wednesday night group:

> **Character Arc #1: Xanthum the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould) breaks his "curse."** Xanthum is a member of the Deeplantern Guild, a society of undersea explorers, but he thinks he's cursed. Maybe it's because every ship he's sailed on has (eventually) come to a terrible end. By the end of the last session, I want to find a way to make it clear that the curse is broken. That probably means I should refrain from blowing up the party's flagship (again). There's also the matter of Xanthum being imprisoned in the Nine Hells for six years, which has led to his deep-seeded resentment (and fear) of all things infernal. That little bit of character melodrama should be well on its way toward a resolution by the time this article is published.
>
> **Character Arc #2: Ravok the goliath battlemind (played by Andrew Finch) discovers how he got his psionic powers.** For more information on Ravok's destiny and his possible connection to the evil Starlord Evendor, click here.
>
> **Character Arc #3: Deimos the tiefling sorcerer (played by Chris Youngs) unites the Sea Kings and establishes his reputation as the greatest Sea King to ply the oceans of Iomandra.** Sea King Impstinger (as Deimos is known) has one of the smallest fleets on the Dragon Sea, but he's turned his flagship into an infernally powered, nigh-invincible juggernaut. Deimos also has the spirit of an ancient dragon sorcerer living inside him, driving his ambition. Will this spirit give him the advantage he needs to humble Sea King Senestrago and convince to the other Sea Kings to look past Deimos' les-than-remarkable upbringing and recognize his true noble self? We've already seen the dragon spirit manifest in times of great need, and I would very much like to see it emerge once more before the campaign is through. It would also be cool if Deimos could achieve his goal without the fabled artifact that previous Sea Kings relied on to win their peers' allegiancethe legendary cutlass *Fathomreaver*, which the party lost many levels ago.
>
> **Character Arc #4: Vargas the deva wizard/avenger (played by Rodney Thompson) becomes the Raven Queen's one true champion or not.**

Vargas has one more quest to fulfill for the Lady of Fate: the destruction of the warforged. However, he is torn. If he decides to let the warforged survive, all is not lost. Maybe Vargas will find another way to appease Her Majesty. And if that doesn't work out, he can (in the guise of Sea King Silvereye) strive to spread the Raven Queen's faith throughout the Dragovar Empire. There's also the matter of Vargas's race: he began the campaign as an eladrin who was, through his own designs, transformed into a deva, but now he's becoming more like his old self again. It's all part of his paragon path-slash-epic destiny, and one of those gradual bits of character development that helps to define the character, but the time has come for the "real Vargas" to shine through.

Character Arc #5: Fleet the warforged warden (played by Nacime Khemis) liberates his fellow warforged. Fleet has already achieved independence, and his messianic journey to free the rest of his kind has been a strong focus for the past several sessions, and will continue to play out over the course of the campaign. However, things are complicated by the fact that his ultimate goal conflicts with the goals of two of his companions. Ideally, this conflict will be resolved before all is said and done.

Character Arc #6: Thorin the warforged soldier (played by "special guest star" Tom LaPille) also wants to "liberate" the warforged. Thorin was recently persuaded to abandon his allegiance to Vecna and become a freethinking individual like Fleet. But Thorin is not like Fleet at all. Thorin is unusual in that he has a singular, dominant soul trapped inside of him instead of an admixture of souls. His dominant soul belongs to a disgruntled dwarf paladin who believes the warforged are walking prisons, and only by destroying them can he free their bound spirits and set them on a righteous path to the afterlife. As yet, Thorin's true intentions are unknown to the rest of the party . . . but clearly this "special guest star" is on the verge of wearing out his welcome. (And because he's a special guest star, his survival is shall we say not guaranteed!)

In terms of character and campaign arcs, recognizing what needs to be resolved before the end of the campaign is the first step in ensuring a satisfactory conclusion. Once I've reminded myself of the campaign arcs and character arcs that need to be addressed, I can set about brainstorming a "wish list" of what I'd like to see happen before the curtain falls.

THE WISH LIST

My end-of-campaign wish list consolidates my own hopes and dreams with what I imagine are the hopes and dreams of my players the things they most want to see happen before the characters ride off into the sunset. I think of it as a crude road map. The key to creating a manageable wish list is to keep the number of wishes few in number. I arbitrarily recommend no more than one wish-list item per game session left in the campaign. Obviously, if you have only three sessions left and five character arcs to wrap up, some crunching or clever combining might be required.

Based on my initial assumption that the Wednesday night campaign has roughly ten game sessions remaining, I've compiled a wish list that tries to envision what the remaining sessions will cover based on the campaign arcs and character arcs described above.

END-OF-CAMPAIGN WISH LIST

1. Xanthum is drawn back to the Nine Hells, but the trip proves surprisingly fruitful. (Character Arc #1)
2. Starlord Evendor is "dealt with" somehow. (Campaign Arc #1; Character Arc #2)
3. The heroes have a chance to destroy Vecna, with a little help. (Campaign Arc #2)
4. The fate of the warforged is determined. (Campaign Arc #2; Character Arcs #4, 5, and 6)
5. Ravok returns to his home island and discovers that his tribe needs him. (Character Arc #2)
6. The Sea Kings' alliance is tested. (Campaign Arc #3; Character Arc #3)
7. Sea King Senestrago rears his head one last time. (Campaign Arc #3; Character Arc #3)
8. Vargas achieves his true and final form. (Character Arc #4)
9. Fate allows the party to turn Kharl and Nemencia, their most hated enemies, against one another.
10. The heroes are drawn back to where the campaign beganthe island of Irindol.

You'll note that many of these items have undetermined outcomes; that's because it's not enough to simply meet the players' expectations. Sometimes you need to reach beyond themeven defy them, on occasion. I don't have a crystal ball that tells me when it's a good idea to defy expectations rather than deliver on them, my general philosophy is that a DM should only defy expectations when the likely outcome is something that will increase the stakes in a way the players will probably enjoy. For example, everyone is expecting some kind of showdown with the evil Starlord Evendor, but in my Monday night game, I defied player expectations by letting a group of NPCs capture the villain. That didn't spoil the campaign arc, because a few sessions later the heroes were instrumental in thwarting an attempt by Evendor's evil apprentices to break him out of jail. It's unlikely I'll pull the same stunt with the Wednesday group, but I can mess with their heads in other ways. My

main point is that I don't need to nail down every detail at this stage; I simply want to make sure I'm not forgetting anything important.

You'll further note that the last two items on my wish list aren't specifically tied to the major campaign arcs or character arcs, per se. However, based on various player conversations and murmurings overheard by yours truly, I believe these occurrences deliver on certain other player expectations, and more importantly, they could spawn really awesome game sessions. I haven't a clue which of these ten ideas if any will form the crux of the campaign's climax. A good DM remains silently attentive whenever the players speculate on the likely "climax" of the campaign a topic too lengthy to discuss here and now, but one I probably should tackle at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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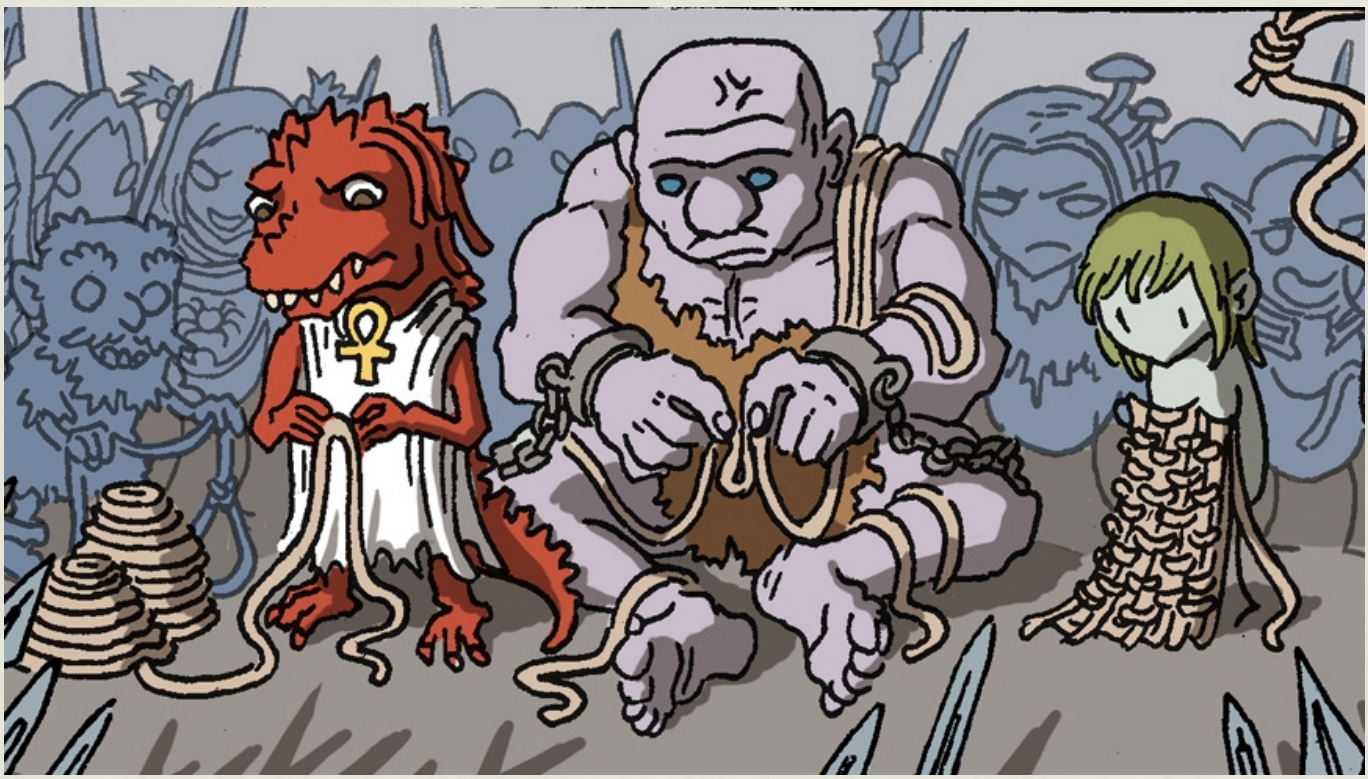

OUT OF THE ABYSS WALKTHROUGH POSTER
CARTOON - 11/26/2015

ARTICLE

FROM JOSE CHUNG

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The session begins underwater. Bartho, the party's beleaguered human fighter, is staring at the floating corpse of a doppelganger he'd slain the previous week. Suddenly, a dark shape emerges from the inky depths . . . a 15-foot-diameter bathysphere shaped like an eye of the deep (an aquatic beholder). As it passes by, Bartho spies a familiar figure at the helm. He's faced this evil eladrin warlock before, and Bartho can almost smell the blood in the water.

I watch a lot of serialized television dramas, and by studying the best of them, I've learned how to sustain and pace my weekly D&D game. In terms of narrative, a D&D campaign is a lot like a serialized TV show, the difference being that a D&D campaign is performed as it's being written, and consequently the action and dialogue are mostly improvised.

Having watched a great deal of serialized drama, it occurs to me that what happens in

the middle of an episode is ultimately less important than what happens at the beginning and the end. If you're a show runner, your ultimate goal is to create a dedicated following. You want to keep your audience engaged and turn them into diehard fans who will follow the story from beginning to end. You need to make sure they never get bored and never lose touch with the story you're trying to tell. The same is true if you're a Dungeon Master running a campaign, only in this case your players are both the actors and the audience.

I would argue that in a typical 45-minute episode of a serialized TV show (and most hour-long network shows are roughly that length), the most important minute occurs in the first thirty seconds and the last thirty seconds. The first thirty seconds of an episode tells the audience what they're in for. The last thirty seconds gets them pumped for the next episode. Within these short spans of time, a good storyteller can hit emotional beats that will not only resonate throughout the episode but also make the audience feel a certain way at the end of the episode and "tide them over" until the next one.

Thirty seconds.

That's how long I have to set the atmosphere and mood of a game session. It's also how much time I need to set up a cliffhanger or evoke some other emotionally resonant endpoint for the session. The notion first occurred to me while watching a rerun of an episode of *The X-Files* titled "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*." If you haven't seen it, you're missing one of the most brilliant hours (or, rather, 45 minutes) of network television EVER. It's the one with the cigarette-smoking alien, Jesse "The Body" Ventura and Alex Trebek (yes, the game show host) as "men in black," and arguably the most infamous and oft-quoted nod to Dungeons & Dragons ever spoken onscreen.

The episode opens thusly: *We're standing on a dark, lonely stretch of road in Washington state, staring up at the sky. Suddenly, a massive starship hovers into frame and blots out the night . . . or not. What we thought was a starship is actually the underbelly of a hydraulic crane lift carrying a power line repairman. He gripes to his boss on a cell phone while being hoisted up into the air.*

Instead of proof of alien visitors, we get a rather mundane counter-revelation, a scene so banal that it makes us wonder how we could ever believe aliens were anything but figments of our childlike imaginations.

The next 44 minutes of the episode are outstanding, but I won't spoil anything. Instead, I'll jump to the ending: *In the middle of the night, a lovelorn teenage boy stands on the rain-soaked lawn outside his girlfriend's house and throws a small rock at her bedroom window, rousing her. He tells her how much he loves her, to which she replies, "Love. Is that all you men think about?" The boy, dejected, walks off into the night, and we're reminded (in the immortal words of Jose Chung himself) that we humans may not be alone in the universe, and yet (tragically) we ARE all alone.*

The first thirty seconds of "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*" tell us to expect the unexpected. The last thirty seconds tell us what the whole crazy episode was about. That, my friends, is TIGHT.

Think of other episodes of other television shows that you like. Recall, if you can, the first and last scenes of those episodes and ask yourself, how important are they in (a) communicating the overarching theme or mood of the episode and (b) carrying a specific emotional tone. In similar fashion, a Dungeon Master can, in the first thirty seconds, tell players any one of a number of things (not necessarily EVERYTHING) about the next three hours, or at the very least, remind players where the previous session ended by picking up where it left off in an emotionally satisfying way. The DM can also end the session whenever he or she wishes, preferably with some kind of emotional beat. It could end with excitement (in the form of a cliffhanger), a sobering sense of closure (in the form of a resolved campaign arc), a tearjerker, a revelation, or in any one of several other emotionally satisfying moments.

LESSONS LEARNED

While it's true that Dungeons & Dragons can teach you a lot about courage, it can also teach you a lot about the power of strong narrative, the goal of which is to hit certain emotional beats to brace players for what's to come and ultimately make them feel a certain way by the end. If you think back on the best game sessions you ever ran, they probably got off to a good start and also ended well. If you pay particular attention to the first thirty seconds and the last thirty seconds of your game sessions, I think what happens in between has a better chance of making the time investment well worth it for all concerned.

- **The first thirty seconds set the tone for the session that follows.**
- **The last thirty seconds make the players glad they stuck around.**

Our last Monday night game session (or episode, as I like to call it) almost ended with the characters thwarting a villain's escape by flash-freezing him inside of his

beholder-shaped bathysphere, but it didn't feel right to end the evening at that moment, so I let the session continue a few minutes beyond that point. To my surprise and delight, the players began discussing whether or not to let the villain suffocate in the ice. The party was torn down the middle, with three PCs in favor of letting him die and three wanting to keep him alive. They agreed to let Ardyn, a silver dragon NPC, cast the deciding vote. That's when I ended the session. In the wake of battle, the PCs had a cool ethical debate, and I got my cliffhanger. What would Ardyn decide? The players would have to wait until the next game session to find out!

If you were DMing the Monday night game instead of me, how would you kick off the next session? You might begin precisely where I left off, with Ardyn deciding to spare the villain's life or let him die. You might contrive a third option and have Ardyn make that choice instead. You might begin the session at some other point in some other place with some other character, such as a PC who was absent the previous week. You might begin the session ten years after Ardyn's decision and spend the rest of the campaign dealing with the consequences of her decision. Depending on what happens in those first thirty seconds, your players will respond a certain way. Hopefully they'll react exactly as you'd intended, and that reaction will set the tone for the hours that follow, leading to a denouement that will convince the players that your campaign is worth "tuning in" for next week.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

OLD SCHOOL

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The weekly game was postponed because of Gen Con. A bunch of us flew out to Indianapolis, where the weather was surprisingly enjoyable, particularly given the horrendously warm trends of the weeks leading up to the show. I have since returned to Seattle, and I dare say the highlight of my show was getting a big, warm hug from Wil Wheaton, who told me some Aeofel-related secrets that won't be revealed until the D&D Next Live Game at PAX this Labor Day weekend. I also ran a few D&D games, including a session with Ed Greenwood that was a bit randy. (*Quelle surprise*, as the drow say.)

My "DM travel kit" this year consisted of a short, homespun FR adventure (a sequel to the one I ran for the writers of *Robot Chicken* a couple years ago), a small plastic container of dice and miniatures, some rolled-up wet-erase battle maps, and the D&D Next playtest rules and pre-generated characters. No DM screen. No laptop. No special apps for the iPad. I like to travel light.

The summer evaporated quickly this year, like an ice cube in the sun. I suspect a lot of D&D campaigns will be evaporating as well, or at least going on hiatus as students segue into the fall semester. Meanwhile, other campaigns will be starting up in high school and college D&D clubs (I trust such things still exist) across the country, if not across the entire world, both "for reals" and on the Internet.

A lot has been published for DMs over the years for various editions of the D&D game, including a half dozen *Dungeon Master's Guides*, dozens of apps, scores of DM screens, hundreds of campaign-building accessories, thousands of adventures, tens of thousands of miniatures, hundreds of thousands of monsters, thousands upon thousands of websites and chatrooms, and millions upon millions of words of advice that basically distill down to "It's your game; do what you want, just don't be a jerk." If you want to be a DM, there is no shortage of materials out there for free and for purchase designed to help you. If you don't believe me, spend an afternoon roaming the floor of the exhibit hall at Gen Con.

While waiting for my flight home in the Indianapolis airport, I had a chance encounter with a fairly new DM who recognized me from the Penny Arcade D&D videocasts. After thanking me for ushering him safely through D&D's terrifying wrought-iron gates, he confessed that he was having some problems keeping his new campaign afloat. He then asked me a couple of back-to-back questions which I get asked a lot, namely: *What do I use to create and run my campaign? Are there specific products or resources that I use to run my game?* My answer surprised him.

Although I place a number of DM resources on pedestals and swear up, down, and sideways that they made me into the DM I am today, I'm what you'd call an "old-school" DM. In other words, I use very little. When I started running D&D games, I had one *Dungeon Master's Guide* (as big, heavy, and monumentally important as the stone slabs borne by Charlton Heston's Moses in *The Ten Commandments*), one campaign setting (Greyhawk), three books of monsters, a few dozen published adventure modules with cool duotone maps on the inside covers, a few issues of Dragon magazine, and that's about it. No initiative trackers. No magnetic condition trackers. No pre-painted plastic miniatures. No foldout battle maps. No boxed sets. No *Dwarven Forge*. No Internet.

A little later came *Dungeon* magazine, which I hold up as the best DM accessory ever created (and no less helpful today than it was back in 1986). And though my opinion is colored by the fact that I consider myself the magazine's biggest fan, in truth I (like many DMs) run very few of its adventures as written and rely on it more for *ideas* and *inspiration*. A DM without a *Dungeon* subscription is like a boy without *Lego*. It's just . . . unwholesome.

"My brain," I replied to that young fellow in the airport. My brain contains pretty much everything I need to run my D&D campaign: ideas, imagination, improvisational know-how. It also contains the memories of lots of previous game sessions both successful and disastrous (mostly successful), not to mention old adventures and 87.333% of everything that Gary Gygax packed into the original three AD&D hardcover rulebooks. As for the other 12.667%, well, let's just say my mind is not the steel trap it used to be.

LESSONS LEARNED

Miniatures and iPads are great and all, but as far as I'm concerned, a DM doesn't need much to create a long-lasting and memorable campaign beyond the three I's:

- **Inspiration**
- **Imagination**
- **Improvisation**

I must admit that I don't read or collect a lot of RPG products, nor do I have a single RPG-related app on my cellphone or iPad. I also don't have much time to surf the net. However, adventure and campaign ideas can come from anywhere. If you've read previous installments of this column, you already know where I get most of my inspiration from television shows, movies, nonfiction, fiction, and published D&D adventures. Imagination is what takes all of those ideas those influences and combines them with my own in new and wonderful ways to create something that feels fresh. It's also the thing I rely on to help me decide how to start a session and how to end it. Improvisation is the coping mechanism I use in between to energize my players and propel the story forward. It's more of a muscle or a skill than an inherent power of the human mind, so unlike ideas and imagination, it takes practice and repetition to develop it.

In a live Gen Con "Gamer to Gamer" podcast hosted by **The Tome Show**, I was asked what advice I could offer with regard to helping DMs improvise better. In retrospect, I am not altogether satisfied with the answer I gave in the moment, which was something like (but not nearly as articulate as): *Let down your guard around your players, and overcome that fear of playing the fool in front of them.* It actually bothered me that I couldn't conjure a more satisfactory response or offer up something more tangible, something like "Eat lots of *Frosted Miniwheats*!" or "Don't skip gym class!" It was, in short, a poorly improvised answer, if I do say so myself (proof positive that even the strongest human muscle gives out under enough weight).

I have no background in theater or any formal training in "improv" (which is why I feel like a skydiver leaping out of a plane without a parachute whenever I do a D&D live game), but this is one deficiency I've taken strides to overcome. Improvisational skill is fueled by inspiration and imagination, but it is *born* out of self-awareness, and a very smart teacher once told me that you can't begin to improve without first realizing your own shortcomings. Although it's not one of the three I's mentioned above, *improvement* is very much a part of being a DM. There's always room for it, and I don't care how good of a DM you think you are, you can do better. A self-aware painter improves with every painting, a self-aware actor improves with every performance, a self-aware writer improves with every story, and a self-aware DM improves with every game session.

One last remark about improvisation, and then I'll wrap up: When you look at the vast amount of material produced for DMs over the years, very little of it helps Dungeon Masters become better improvisers. If you know of any resources out there designed specifically to help DMs pump up their improvisational muscles, feel free to leave a quick comment. This old-school DM may not use a lot of fancy tools and toys at his gaming table, but he's just as eager to improve as that other Dungeon Master he met in the Indianapolis airport.

P.S. I lied. There's one other thing every DM needs: a velvet napping pillow shaped like a d20. Why didn't anyone tell me these things existed?! They used to sell them on **thinkgeek.com**, but now they're gone! If you have a drool-free d20 pillow you don't need anymore, feel free to send it my way.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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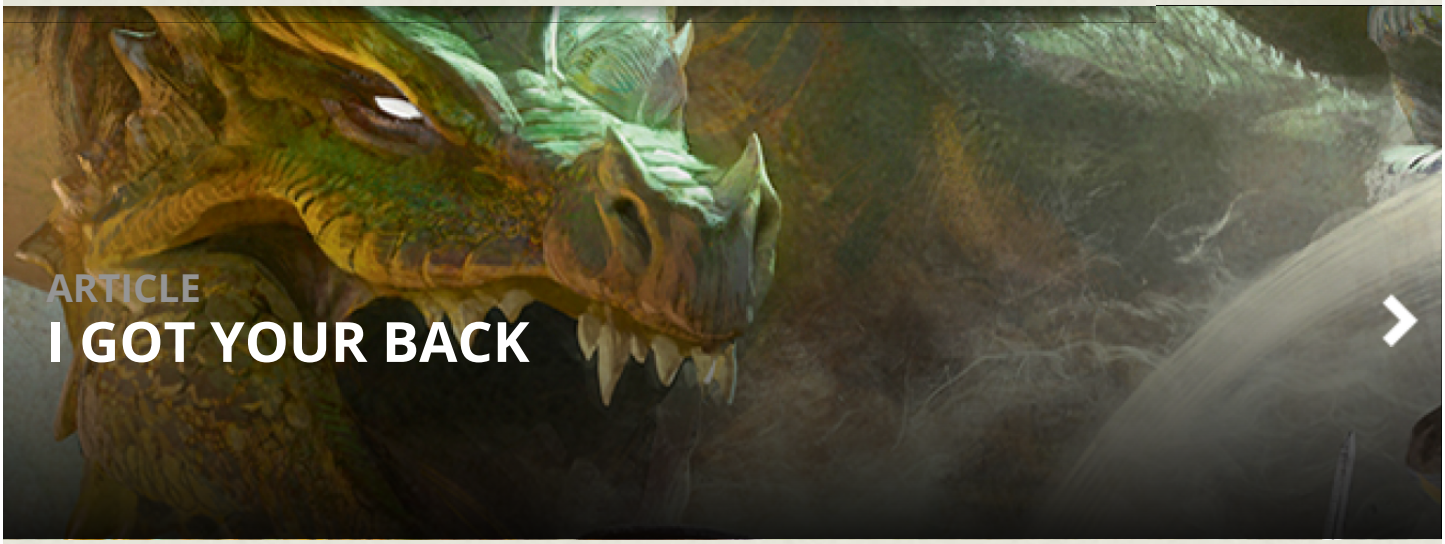
FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

I GOT YOUR BACK

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Over a thousand islands comprise the Dragovar Empire, a sprawling and decadent dragonborn dominion of undisputed power facing threats external and internal. The heroes have just overcome an external threat posed by the Far Realm by thwarting the machinations of Starlord Evendor and freeing the enslaved Myrthon Regency a Dragovar vassal state from Evendor's mind flayer allies. However, some military leaders within the Dragovar Empire aren't ready for the war to end. Even though the Myrthon Regency no longer poses a threat, they seek to press the attack and take their fleets deeper into Myrthon waters. Why? Because the Emperor is believed dead, the Dragovar capital is in chaos without strong leadership, and these dragonborn officers are hungry. They need a war to nourish their bloodlust, and they need the spoils of war to satisfy their draconic greed. For all the damage Starlord Evendor and the illithids have inflicted, they call to Bahamut for justice and Tiamat for vengeance, yet the gods do not answer their prayers.

Ardyn, a silver dragon who seeks to overthrow the corrupt Dragovar government, has a small but powerful group of Bahamut-worshiping knights at her command. Conversely, the Vost Azaan, a sinister offshoot of the Dragovar secret service,

serves Tiamat's interests by covertly seeking vengeance against the empire's enemies, in particular those responsible for enabling Starlord Evendor's rise to power. Between these two secret groups stand the heroes the ones who can tip the balance, if they dare. The problem is, unlike Ardyn and the Vost Azaan, the heroes are not entirely convinced the Dragovar Empire is worth saving.

The truth is, when it comes to my D&D campaign, I draw more inspiration from nonfiction than fiction. I find the stories of real people infinitely more fascinating than their fictional counterparts, even though fictional characters are often based on real people. There's something to be said by going right to the source.

For example, when I was creating the Iomandra campaign, I wanted to model the Dragovar Empire after ancient Rome, and so I read books on the subject not stories set in a fictional version of Rome, but biographies and histories and encyclopedia entries describing Rome and the actual people who lived there during one of the most romanticized periods of human history. I studied Roman philosophy, government, conflicts, and key personages whose accounts are fairly well documented. My goal wasn't to become an expert on ancient Rome, but to plant some ideas in my brain . . . ideas which would hopefully bear fruit and become adventures or key NPCs in my campaign. That was five years ago, and I'm unsure of the extent to which all that reading has sustained my campaign or informed the choices I've made. However, were you to ask my players what they think of the Dragovar Empire, they'd tell you that it feels like ancient Rome, riddled with corruption and internal strife and teetering on the edge of oblivion. But unlike ancient Rome, the Dragovar Empire has powerful heroes to save it.

One of my more recent inspirations is a book titled *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, written by Bill Bryson and first published by Broadway Books in 2003. The book is a gripping account of history going all the way back to the birth of the universe, and though it presents fascinating explanations for many truths that govern our existence, I find myself drawn to the human stories contained within the accounts of the people who've made history with their discoveries and theories. Some of these people are celebrated and renowned, while others have been overlooked and nearly forgotten . . . or, in some cases, all but erased from the annals of history by their rivals.

Early on in his book, Bryson tells the story of an English country doctor named Gideon Algernon Mantell, who I'd never heard of before. Chances are you've never heard of him either, but his story (as told by Bryson) is so spectacular and tragic as to warrant brief mention, for purposes of illustrating a point:

In 1822, Mantell stumbled upon a walnut-sized stone that later turned out to be a fossilized tooth belonging to a rather large creature from the Cretaceous period in Earth's history. In short, he made the first dinosaur fossil discovery on record. However, Mantell was an amateur paleontologist at best, and he was strongly urged

by an acquaintance to research his discovery in more detail before submitting a paper to the Royal Society, leaving open the window for said acquaintance (a Reverend Buckland) to steal Mantell's thunder and be credited as the discoverer of this ancient line of Earth creatures.

Mantell's life continued to be riddled with failure, for though he began collecting more fossils and publishing papers, no one paid him much notice. This preoccupation ultimately harmed his practice and ruined his family. Mantell was forced to sell his fossil collection to make ends meet, and his wife and children left him.

While Mantell wallowed in destitution and obscurity, there arose a star in paleontology named Dr. Richard Owen, who coined the now-famous term *dinosaur*. In his book, Bryson describes Owen as "gaunt and sinister, like the villain in a Victorian melodrama," and "the only person Charles Darwin was ever known to hate." For all his education and gifts, Owen was fond of taking credit for other men's discoveries and ruined the lives of people he disliked. In 1841, the entirely unsuccessful Gideon Mantell fell from a carriage, became entangled in the reins, and was dragged some distance across rough ground. The accident deformed his spine and left him crippled. As Bryson puts it, Owen seized upon this opportunity to expunge Mantell's paleontological contributions from record, renaming species that Mantell had named years before and claiming credit for their discoveries. Just as the carriage accident all but destroyed Mantell's body, Owen all but destroyed Mantell's body of work.

Owen's "transgressions" (as Bryson so eloquently puts it) were becoming the subject of much debate within the Royal Society, but even a tarnished reputation couldn't stop him from becoming the father of London's Natural History Museum. As for Mantell, he took his own life in 1852. Following his death, Mantell's deformed spine was removed and sent to the Royal College of Surgeons where, ironically, it was entrusted to Richard Owen and kept for all to see in the college's Hunterian Museum.

A statue of Richard Owen stands in the main hall of London's Natural History Museum. Alas, the same cannot be said for Gideon Algernon Mantell.

LESSONS LEARNED

The devious Richard Owen and the sad story of Mantell's spine inspired an NPC villain in the Iomandra campaign: Zarkhrysa, the dragonborn leader of the Vost Miraj (the Dragovar Empire's secret service). Several sessions ago, the heroes stormed the Vost Miraj headquarters in the Dragovar capital city and made their way to Zarkhrysa's office. There, atop Zarkhrysa's desk, they found the skull of her dragonborn predecessor. Did Zarkhrysa have a hand in her predecessor's demise? Perhaps. The skull might be a trophy and a symbol of her rise to power, or it might just be a reminder of what happens to those who aren't careful in her line of work. The heroes also found several scrolls in Zarkhrysa's desk, each one bearing a Speak with Dead ritual. From this discovery, the players concluded that Zarkhrysa was using ritual magic to learn her predecessor's dark secrets . . . and now the heroes could learn them as well.

Truth inspires fiction. In particular, Richard Owen and Gideon Mantell inspired me to create a villain who not only kept the skull of her unfortunate predecessor but also used it to further her dark agenda. Now the skull has fallen into the player characters' hands, and there's no telling what they might learn from it.

If you're a Dungeon Master searching for inspiration to keep your campaign afloat, you can do worse than steep yourself in history, for within history's vault are countless stories that will tickle your imagination and spark ideas. You can do much worse than pick up a copy of Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, which has lots of human stories to plunder. For instance, did you know that the man after whom the Geiger counter is named was a Nazi who betrayed his Jewish colleagues to the Third Reich, or that the man who invented chlorofluorocarbons (which Bryson

calls "just about the worst invention of the twentieth century") was strangled to death by another of his not-so-great inventions? Yeah. Go read the book.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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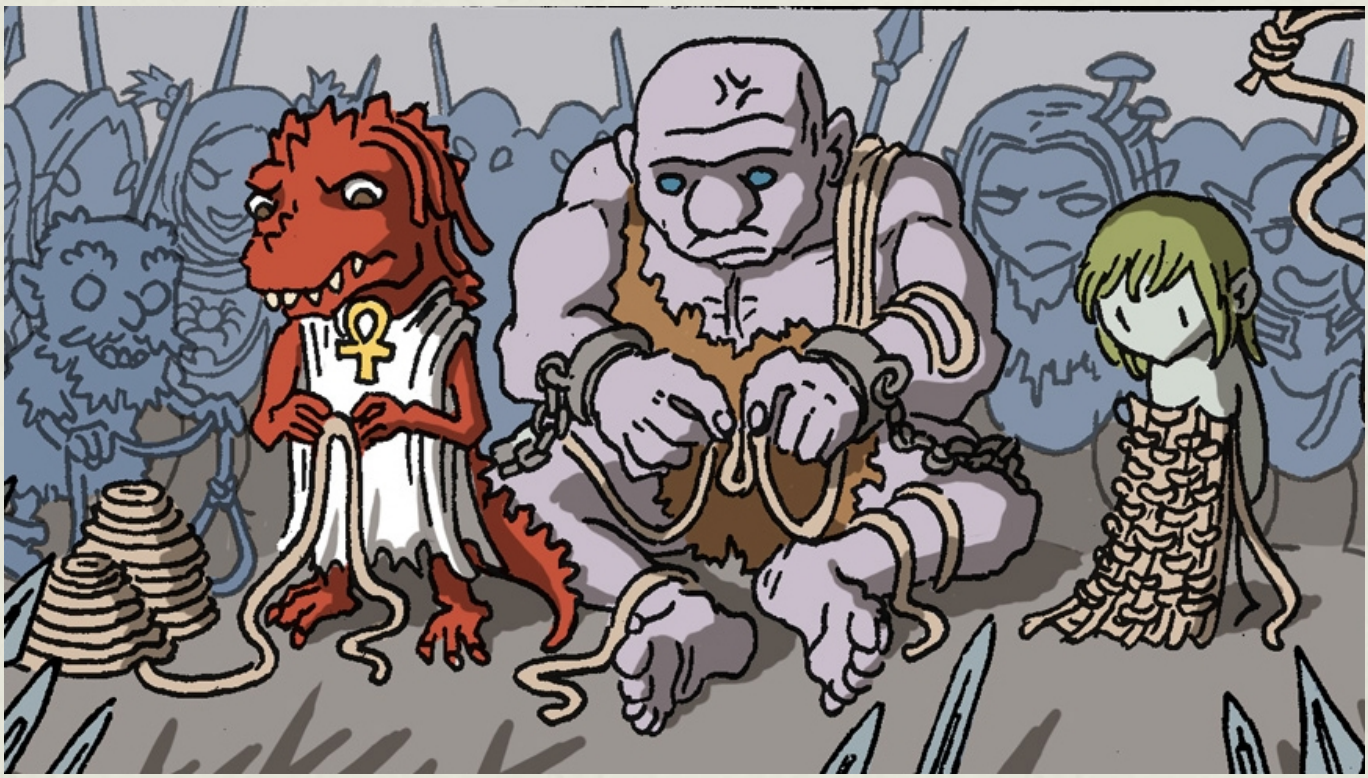

OUT OF THE ABYSS WALKTHROUGH POSTER

CARTOON - 11/26/2015

By Jason Thompson

Jason Thompson illustrates the misfortunates of a group of adventurers as they navigate the Underdark and play through the story featured in Out of the Abyss.

MORE INFO

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

TRUST GNOME ONE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. Until recently, Curt Gould played a character in my campaign named Xanthum Zail. As a gnome bard, Xanthum provided some useful healing and battlefield control powers, but he never earned the complete trust of his adventuring companions. Curt had imbued the character with one fatal flaw, an attribute which wasn't reflected at all in his statistics: Xanthum brought ill luck to any ship he set foot on.

When he conceived Xanthum's back-story, Curt made specific mention of past expeditions gone awry, but never once did Xanthum willfully bring ruin to any of his traveling companions. It was more like a series of unfortunate coincidences. When he first joined the party, Xanthum thought it prudent to keep his previous misadventures under wraps. Fortunately for him, the other players were more interested in Xanthum's healing ability than his back-story, and he was welcomed aboard.

I exploited Xanthum's "curse" on more than one occasion, but the most damaging event happened at the beginning of epic tier. While he was possessed by a powerful star spawn entity, Xanthum set off a Far Realm mine that sank the party's ship and killed nearly everyone aboard, including several PCs. The dead characters were eventually restored to life, their ship was salvaged from the ocean's depths

and made to sail again, and the star spawn invader in Xanthum's brain was banished. However, the damage was done; the party would never trust Xanthum again.

Gnomes are stereotypically hard to trust. They are the Puckish rapscallions and madcap inventors of the D&D game. But Curt didn't play Xanthum as an instigator or troublemaker. Quite the opposite: Xanthum was actually very trustworthy and never set out to jeopardize his fellow adventurers. However, I took advantage of any opportunity to place Xanthum in the midst of misfortune to make his "curse" readily apparent. Once, he was banished to the Nine Hells, tortured, and scarred for life by the ordeal. Sometime later, a pit fiend used Xanthum as a receptacle for its life force, and although the fiend was eventually exorcised, Xanthum retained some of the devil's knowledge and put it to use, plotting revenge against his infernal torturers. None of this sat well with the other player characters. After all, what could be more dangerous than a mentally unhinged gnome out for revenge?

Using political information and secrets gained from the pit fiend, Xanthum not only survived a return trip to the Nine Hells but also rose quickly through the infernal ranks, earning the title of duke. Upon returning to his companions, Xanthum tried to summon diabolical aid to repel an invading force, but his adventuring companions didn't want devils in their midst, so they turned against the gnome. Xanthum was cast off the ship and barely escaped with his life.

Xanthum's recent misadventures not only represent the culmination of a rather gratifying character arc but also illustrate the risks of allowing inner-party conflict to drive campaign narrative. As I've stated before, conflict between characters can be extremely rewarding if all the players are "on board" with it, but if even one player finds the idea off-putting, it's best avoided.

This year's "Ask the DM" seminar at PAX was a packed house and included a half-hour Q&A session, during which the panelists (myself included) fielded all sorts of great questions. Every year, without fail, the topic of inner-party conflict arises. Some DMs encourage it, while others discourage it, but as Rodney Thompson pointed out (and correctly so), neither approach is wrong. Every game group has a social contract that the DM must honor and uphold an unwritten code that defines what is acceptable and unacceptable at the game table. If your players are cool with inner-party conflict and you deem it an essential element of your campaign, then have at it!

One of the obvious outcomes of inner-party conflict is the loss of one or more characters, and everyone at the game table needs to understand and accept the risks; if they can't, you should urge players to focus on external conflicts rather than internal ones. But even experienced DMs who foster inner-party conflicts can't always predict the outcome. I was surprised by the turn of events that resulted in Xanthum getting punted off the party's ship, particularly given that his recent behavior hardly represented his worst campaign offense, but on this occasion he was cast off in no uncertain terms. It became a matter of trust: the other heroes finally reached the point where they stopped trusting Xanthum, and so he got the boot. (It didn't help, I suppose, that one session earlier a gnome NPC named Barnacle Trizm blew up the ship's rudder, hindering the party's ability to escape an attacking vessel.)

So, yeah, Xanthum was forced out of the party rather suddenly and unexpectedly. It was as much my fault as anyone's. At the end of the session, I asked Curt whether he wanted to continue playing Xanthum or not. I reassured him that it wouldn't be hard to dream up a way for the gnome bard to worm his way back into the party. I am, after all, the DM, with the power of a thousand djinn to shape the world and manipulate events to suit my dark whims. Curt ultimately decided to give Xanthum a break. He had another character in reserve that he was itching to play. (The sudden departure of a character isn't necessarily a bad thing, particularly when you have a player who isn't married to the character and who likes to try different things.) As far as I'm concerned, the player decides what he or she wants to play, and it's my job as the DM to make it work within the context of the campaign.

Curt's back-up character is a human cleric of Melora named Divin, who traces his origin back to the start of the campaign. In fact, Curt "retired" Divin midway through the paragon tier to make way for Xanthum. I asked Curt to contrive a way by which Divin would suddenly find himself twelve levels higher, and ultimately he settled on the notion of Melora investing Divin with a fragment of her power, basically using him to help the rest of the party in its time of greatest need. So, Divin jumped from 17th level to 29th level and was instantly back in play. The rest of the party welcomed him back into the fold, and Xanthum became the gnome that time forgot. (Although just between you and me, I don't think we've seen the last of him.)

Curt was lucky to have his old character lying around. If Curt didn't have Divin to "dust off," I suspect Xanthum would have found his way back into the party through some bit of narrative legerdemain (just to spare Curt the pain of creating a brand-new 29th-level character). However, as much as I love Xanthum as a character (he's one of my all-time favorites), I can't say I'm disappointed to see him fade away that's a gnome trait, by the way. The best characters never overstay their welcome, and in a way, the reintroduction of Divin at the end of the campaign takes the Wednesday night campaign back to where it began. The party can finally unite against some of the campaign's big external threats without having to worry about that chipper little gnome tripping them up.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are two ways in which inner-party conflict is instigated:

- **A player does something to put two or more characters in opposition**

- **A DM does something to spark conflict between two or more characters**

I won't speak to the former except to say that players who are hell-bent on evoking inner-party conflict are free to do so if your campaign allows it, and as a DM it's your job to "direct" that conflict in a manner that ultimately entertains the players and propels the campaign forward. The conflict needs to be constructive, not destructive. It needs to fuel the narrative. If it starts to get out of control, to the point where the game's participants are no longer having a good time (as be sure to count yourself in the mix), then you might need to intervene and remind the players that conflicts between characters need to be resolved eventually . . . and in a manner that everyone can appreciate and enjoy.

The Xanthum conflict is an example of the latter a conflict sparked by the DM. I created a situation in which Xanthum's "curse" would cause his fellow party members to turn against him. It was a risk, but I knew Curt would enjoy the roleplaying challenge. I also knew that Xanthum was well liked by the other players (if not their characters), so the chances of him getting killed or dumped were minimal. In this instance, I bet against the house and lost.

You might think that the Xanthum incident would discourage me from instigating further inner-party conflicts, but you'd be wrong. I'm a sucker for character-driven conflict, particularly at higher levels when my players know their characters really well and I'm looking for new ways to challenge them. Trust is a major theme in the Iomandra campaign, and any time I can contrive scenarios in which trust is strained or put to the test, the more tense (and hopefully fun) the campaign becomes.

Case in point, Rodney Thompson's character is a sworn champion of the Raven Queen, and he has a holy quest to wipe out all warforged. In my campaign, warforged aren't living constructs; they're powered by necrotic energy, specifically the distilled essence of trapped souls, which is why the Raven Queen cannot abide their existence. The problem is that one of my other players, Nacime Khemis, plays a warforged character. It's a bit of a conundrum, and without Xanthum around to provide a worthy distraction, Rodney and Nacime are going to have to deal with it. And I'd be lying if I said the Wednesday night group didn't have other trust issues to work out before all's said and done. Meanwhile, Xanthum can lie low and plot his revenge. . . .

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

LEAP YEAR

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The game has been cancelled for the fifth week in a row. Despite having eight players, I haven't been able to pull enough players together for various reasons mostly having to do with summer vacations and conventions. Not surprisingly, my players are anxious for things to settle down and for the weekly game to resume, but so much time has passed that they can barely remember where we left off. Under normal circumstances, I would kick off our next session with a recap similar to what many serialized television shows do, but not this time.

I have taken a cue from *Battlestar Galactica* (the reimagined TV series, not the 1970s original) and advanced the timeline of my Monday night campaign by one year. It's a risky move so close to the end of the campaign, but as a DM, I'm always looking for ways to excite my players. I originally planned to surprise them by announcing the timeline advancement at the start of a game session but changed my mind when I

realized that they would need time to reflect on what their characters had done during the intervening months. Instead, I sent them the following email (rollover the red links for explanatory text):

> I'm advancing the in-world timeline. When last we left the heroes, they'd captured **Starlord Evendor** and left it to **Ardyn**, the leader of the Knights of Ardyn, to determine Evendor's fate. The next game session will pick things up approximately one year later. In the intervening months, your characters have been lying low and doing non-adventure-related things. As a homework assignment, I'd like each of you to send me what you imagine your character has done in the intervening time. Here are some major world developments of which your characters are aware:
>
> 1. Ardyn ordered Starlord Evendor's execution, considering him too great a threat to be kept alive.
>
> 2. The death of Starlord Evendor and the attack on the Dragovar warship by the Knights of Ardyn basically ended any hope of reconciliation between the knights and the empire. The **Dragovar Empire** is more convinced than ever that the Knights of Ardyn are terrorists who must be destroyed. Ardyn's island lair has been abandoned, and the knights have gone into hiding. Several of them have been hunted down and exterminated, but Ardyn is still alive. Her whereabouts are unknown, and she isn't reachable via Sending rituals.
>
> 3. The coronation of **Hlastro** is imminent. His mother will serve as Imperial Regent until his coronation, although the Dragovar Empire's martial caste has not formally recognized her title or ended its declaration of martial law in light of the Vhaltese threat (see below). If he lives long enough to be crowned, Hlastro will be the youngest Emperor in the history of the Dragovar Empire. (He'll be 15 years old.)
>
> 4. The Narakhty and Irizaxes noble houses are currently united through marriage and gaining support and influence throughout the Dragovar Empire. They openly oppose Hlastro's impending coronation. **Menes Narakhty** is being positioned as a more adequate candidate for the imperial throne, and rumors abound that his mother, **Kaphira Narakhty**, is actively plotting against the legitimate imperial heir. House Narakhty has powerful friends in the nobility, the Temple of Tiamat, and in the military.
>
> 5. The **Myrthon Regency** no longer poses a threat to the empire. The Dragovar navy patrols Myrthon waters, and the military has rounded up and executed hundreds of high-ranking Myrthon officials convicted of conspiracy and treason. **Tsarana Faijhan**, the daughter of the late Myrthon regent Tsar Dakor, has been installed as a puppet regent (mostly to appease the Myrthon citizenry), and her dragonborn advisors are secretly affiliated with the Knights of Ardyn. If the Dragovar authorities discover this fact, it's likely that Faijhan and her advisors will be arrested and and/or executed.

6. The evil **General Kamal** didn't make many friends when he declared martial law and tried to install himself as Emperor. Kamal was recently stripped of his rank and ousted by his military rivals, with the full support of the Dragovar clergy and concerned nobility. He is under house arrest, and his mental state has deteriorated markedly. The highest-ranking member of the martial caste is currently **General Rhutha**. Although she's popular within her caste, her support among the other castes isn't great. Rhutha is under pressure to deal with the threat posed by Vhalt, and some believe she's reluctant to take orders from an Emperor as young as Hlastro. It's unknown whether she supports Menes Narakhty or not.

7. The new leader of the **Vost Miraj** is a dragonborn named **Khoda**, who reports directly to Rhutha. Khoda recently uncovered a conspiracy to assassinate General Rhutha and personally interrogated several captured conspirators with suspected ties to Vhalt before condemning them to death or life in prison. A warrant has been issued for the arrest and capture of **Sea King Valkroi**, who is allegedly involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Rhutha. The Vost Miraj has much less free reign than it did under its prior leadership.

8. The **Magocracy of Vhalt** has "invaded" **Arkhosia**. Dozens of Vhaltese flying citadels have taken up positions over the islands of **Bael Nerath**, and Vhalt has signed a mutual defense treaty with Bael Nerath and supports the humans' declaration of independence. Having just crushed the Myrthon secession, the Dragovar Empire has no intention of allowing Bael Nerath to break away. The imperial navy has reinforced its blockade around the islands, but the ships cannot stop the Vhaltese citadels from coming and going, so the blockade is ineffective.

9. According to rumors coming out of Bael Nerath, some of the Vhaltese citadels are populated by eladrin, elves, and wilden. Groups of these fey creatures have been seen meeting with Bael Nerathi leaders and officials.

10. The dragonborn wizard **Hahrzan** and the remnants of his evil sect have gone underground. Meanwhile, the **Shan Qabal** has been officially dissolved and its members disavowed by the arcane caste in order to appease the other castes that hold the Shan Qabal responsible for the terrorist attack on **Io'calioth**. Former members of the Shan Qabal not associated with Hahrzan have formed a secret society that still reports to **Lenkhor Krige**, and they still refer to their order as the Shan Qabal.

Time is one of the most overlooked and ignored elements of a D&D campaign. Some DMs are fastidious when it comes to tracking it, but most of us aren't. For the sake of our own sanity, we're willing to put matters of time aside. We don't care if the party wizard achieves 30th level before his 30th birthday, and we're okay with an entire campaign transpiring within a year of game time, despite what history books teach us about medieval life, the Middle Ages, and how long it *really* takes for important events to transpire. In most D&D campaigns, character age is irrelevant; the chance that the party's dwarf paladin or elf ranger will die of old age is virtually *nil*. A pity, really.

Once in a while, I get it in my noggin to tinker with time. Playing with time is risky, but it can also be fun and rewarding. I experienced the benefits firsthand when I allowed the Monday night group to **travel back in time**, and now I'm using time as a narrative device in a different way.

When the producers of *Battlestar Galactica* advanced their show's timeline by one year, they knew they were taking a creative risk, but the potential rewards were irresistible. The show's writers were excited by the drama that might unfold as a result of this narrative leap forward, and the decision allowed the show's primary and secondary characters to explore new relationships and grow in interesting ways. We (the audience) were thrown for a loop at first, but if nothing else, the one-year leap gave us the chance to see Admiral Adama with a mustache, Lee Adama with a potbelly, Kara Thrace with long hair, and Saul Tigh with one eye. These aren't the same high-ranking, gun-toting, Cylon-hating combat junkies we've seen week after week. We get to see how time *transforms* them.

By advancing the timeline in the Monday night game, I'm inviting my players to develop their characters and contribute to the overall narrative of the campaign "" much like a team of writers on a serialized television show. How many times in the campaign do their characters get to enjoy an extended break and exist more or less as normal people? Will my players seize this opportunity to transform their characters and set up future adventure possibilities? I certainly hope so, or this leap forward will be for naught.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are several advantages to advancing my campaign's timeline:

- **I can show longer-term consequences of the heroes' actions**
- **I can reinforce which story arcs are most important going forward**
- **I can give characters extra room to evolve and become part of the world**
- **I can let my players tell some of the story**

Moving forward in time shows the players that their characters' actions have consequences. Nearly all of the NPCs mentioned in the email are individuals with whom the PCs have interacted in the past, and in many cases, the changes that have

transpired are direct results of the party's actions. For example, the heroes thwarted a conspiracy to assassinate the imperial heir, Hlastro. As a consequence, Hlastro is on track to become Emperor, and the Vost Miraj (the imperial secret service) has new leadership. One could argue that it would have been implausible to show so many consequences of the party's actions without advancing the timeline. When concocting these narrative developments, I try to strike a balance between positives and negatives. To some extent, I want the players to feel like their characters' decisions have changed the world for the better, but there also needs to be a few things left to "fix." I also like to dream up consequences that are logical yet unexpected; for example, the heroes were responsible for several changes in leadership within the Dragovar Empire, one of which resulted in a warrant being issued for the arrest of Sea King Valkroi, whom the heroes consider an ally.

The leap forward also lets me encapsulate the most important story arcs of the campaign, which is important as the campaign spirals toward its conclusion. Buried within this email are hints at the various threats the PCs should be concerned about. Some major campaign villains no longer pose an imminent threat, while others clearly have parts to play in the drama yet to unfold. I can also plant seeds for future adventures. For example, the ninth item on my list includes a passing reference to wilden; until now, the only wilden to appear in my campaign is Shawn Blakeney's wilden shaman, Kettenbar, who's spent a sizable chunk of the campaign trying to get back to his home in the Feywild. Perhaps Shawn will seize this opportunity for Kettenbar to reunite with his people; the fact that they're associated with worshipers of an evil god adds an element of mystery and drama.

My players have a golden opportunity to reinvest themselves in the campaign world and imagine ways in which their characters might have evolved in the intervening span of time. After months of bloodshed and running around, the characters are given ample time to accomplish things they wouldn't be able to do in a more compressed or urgent timeframe. They also have a chance to strike off things on their "to do" lists and get into all sorts of player-instigated mischief.

I want my players to have a say in how the campaign unfolds, and if I'm lucky, their ideas and thoughts about what their characters do during a year of "down time" will add new layers of drama to the campaign and inspire future adventures as we resume our breakneck sprint toward the big finish. The next step for me as the DM is to see what ideas they come up with, answer any questions they might have, and figure out what to do with all of this great stuff. I not saying it's easy, but then good storytelling never is.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

BY THE NOSE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The gaming group was shy two players, leaving the party without its two defenders. The remaining players were understandably hesitant to throw their characters into harm's way. Luckily, I had an idea a goal the players could accomplish with minimal bloodshed if they were clever.

The Wednesday night group had a lengthy "to do" list of stuff to accomplish before the end of the campaign. One of the tasks near the top of the list was to hunt down Sea King Senestrago, who had gone into hiding. Senestrago's fleet had ambushed the other Sea Kings during a summit in neutral waters, but the heroes intervened and stormed Senestrago's flagship. In the wake of this latest defeat, Senestrago fled on dragonback to one of his secret island strongholds, which the heroes found and plundered. Again, Senestrago escaped, after which the trail went cold. Other important matters came to the fore, and the pursuit of Sea King Senestrago slipped farther down the "to do" list.

Although the party had more pressing matters, I decided the time had come for the Sea King Senestrago storyline to resurface. The session began with a doppelganger spy in the party's employ telling them about a theft of 15,000 platinum pieces from a warehouse belonging to Sea King Kalas. What did this theft have to do with Sea King Senestrago, you ask? Well, early in the campaign, the PCs

heard rumors that Senestrago's poor leadership had resulted in the defection of several of his captains to rival Sea Kings. It turns out the defections were orchestrated by Senestrago himself. One of these defectors, flying under Sea King Kalas's flag, plundered her warehouse and set out to deliver the stolen funds to Senestrago so that he could begin to rebuild his shattered fleet. The party's doppelganger spy caught wind of the betrayal, and the characters now had the means to find their elusive quarry. All they needed to do was find this errant sea captain and follow him straight to Senestrago. Unfortunately, the captain's vessel had not made port since the theft, so its exact whereabouts was unknown.

Through their spy network, the characters discovered that the elusive captain a half-elf named Rance Urvilgar had a beloved younger sister named Lydia who owned a successful tavern on a backwater raft-town called Underkeel (which, incidentally, is ruled by a crafty pseudodragon named Dart). Based on some well-reasoned advice from their well-informed doppelganger spy, the player characters decided that they could capture Lydia, use a Sending ritual to get in touch with her brother, force a confrontation, and blackmail Urvilgar into divulging Senestrago's location. The rest of the game session was unscripted. The heroes visited Lydia's tavern and gave her every impression that her brother was in danger. Captain Urvilgar, in turn, was given the impression that his sister was the one in danger, and this deception led to a confrontation between the party's flagship and Urvilgar's ship. Unwilling to risk Lydia's life and unable to match power with the heroes' well-armed vessel, Urvilgar eventually caved and told the heroes what they wanted to know.

Not everything went as planned, however. The players decided they wanted the platinum coins that Urvilgar had stolen and hidden in a *booty safe* (a small extradimensional vault) aboard his ship. They allowed Urvilgar and his first mate a tiefling henchwoman named Violence to return to their ship unsupervised to retrieve the platinum in exchange for Lydia's safe return. While Urvilgar retrieved the stolen booty, Violence secretly used a *sending stone* to warn Senestrago of the imminent threat to his life.

I don't mind leading the player characters by the nose once in a while, and my players don't mind it either provided I play by certain guidelines. What are these guidelines, you ask? I'll get to that in just a moment. But first, let me clarify what I mean.

There are times, I've noticed, when my players (and by extension their characters) aren't sure what to do next. They have a "to do" list, but it's not always easy for them to prioritize which objectives or quests are the most crucial or time-sensitive because they don't necessarily have all the information they need to make the call. Moreover, some of the stuff on their "to do" list is keyed to specific characters, such that if certain player characters are absent, it's hard to justify moving forward on those particular quests. Once you omit the character-specific quests, it can still be a

challenge for a short-handed group to decide what to handle next. Fortunately, my players don't freak out if I give them a gentle nudge in one direction or another. They trust that I will nudge them toward something fun.

There are also times when players can't reach consensus on what to do next, and a nudge from me can settle the matter or provide a little direction (or "divine intervention," if you prefer). The alternative is to let the players spend twenty or thirty minutes debating or arguing over which item on their combined "to do" list takes precedence and why . . . which, incidentally, isn't necessarily a bad thing if they enjoy this sort of discussion.

Finally, there are times when a particular story arc comes to an apparent dead end, and the players have no clue how to get their characters back on track without the DM providing some clues or additional information to set further events in motion.

It's easy for a campaign to drag, so when I lead players by the nose, it's seen as an attempt (elegant or ham-handed, depending on the execution) to overcome inertia and provide momentum. That said, my players rarely need my help; most of the time, they are self-motivated and can pick a direction or decide on a course of action with little or no DM intervention. Leading them by the nose is something I do only rarely, and that's probably a good thing.

LESSONS LEARNED

I can tell when I'm leading my players by the nose: the campaign becomes much more "scripted" as things begin to happen without the characters taking an active hand in the unfolding events. In the case of my Wednesday night campaign, the characters had reached a dead end in their quest to find Sea King Senestrago, so I used an NPC to feed the party some information.

I could've given the friendly doppelganger spy the exact location of Sea King Senestrago, but *where's the fun in that?* Leading players by the nose doesn't mean circumventing the adventure. If the goal is to help players "find the fun," the last thing I want to do is take away all of the challenges, complications, roleplaying opportunities, and suspense. Instead, I offer them another chance to catch Senestrago . . . if they play their cards right and everything goes as planned. Well, the truth is, nothing ever goes exactly as planned, and that's part of the fun.

To catch Senestrago, the characters had to travel to Underkeel, negotiate with the raft-town's pseudodragon overlord (who enjoys parties, and perches like a parrot on the shoulder of an ex-pirate captain who lost his marbles), trick Lydia into helping them, pretend to hold her hostage to force a confrontation with her seafaring brother, and convince Captain Urvilgar to give up Senestrago's whereabouts. These

weren't options that I forced on them; in fact, I assumed they would simply kidnap Lydia and hold her hostage, but instead they tricked her into thinking her brother was in danger, which incentivized her to be cooperative. I also figured they'd resort to violence to pressure Rance Urvilgar into divulging Senestrago's whereabouts, but they used innuendo and intimidation instead, allowing them to accomplish their goal without ever once drawing swords.

Here, as promised, are the guidelines I follow when leading my players by the nose:

- **Thou shalt always lead players toward fun, not boredom.**
- **Thou shalt use this opportunity to advance the story of the campaign.**
- **Thou shalt not betray the players' trust by leading their characters into a trap.**
- **Thou shalt never tell the players what their characters say or do.**

If my players are going to allow me to lead them by the nose, they need to trust that I will make the experience anything but dull. My players must also trust that the journey will be worth it in terms of pushing the campaign forward. There's no point nudging them toward *nowhere*.

If following my lead is going to result in the characters falling into a trap, the players will be less inclined to follow my lead next time, and that's ultimately counterproductive. The trap idea can work, but the players either need to suspect a trap from the outset and try to work around it, or I need to drop big clues along the way to foreshadow whatever betrayal I have planned. Both are risky propositions, I'll tell you right now, which is why the general rule stands.

The last point is very important. When running a heavily scripted encounter designed to nudge the player characters in a particular direction, some DMs make the mistake of putting words in the characters' mouths or gods forbid! dictating that characters take specific actions. Unless the characters are possessed, dominated, or otherwise under DM control, that is not the DM's role, and this kind of "leading by the nose" is sure to elicit player contempt.

Next week, assuming I don't get any other bright ideas, I plan to discuss the extent to which I rely on plot devices by which I mean events that need to happen regardless of the PCs' actions or decisions and how much I love and loathe them.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

NECESSARY EVIL

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Peter Schaefer plays a 28th-level halfling rogue named Oleander who moonlights as the leader of a spy network rapidly spreading throughout Iomandra. For the past several levels, his organization has been trying to infiltrate the Dragovar Empire without incurring the wrath of the Vost Miraj, the thoroughly corrupt imperial secret service. Thanks to the party's efforts in thwarting a conspiracy to assassinate the imperial heir and the Vost Miraj's complicity in said plot, Oleander's unnamed spy network has found a crack in the proverbial firewall. However, in the time it has taken Oleander to establish relationships with influential Dragovar nobles and officials, two of the party's sworn enemies have joined forces and set into motion a plan that could wipe out everything Oleander has accomplished.

The Monday night campaign has two major dragonborn villains. One is Zarkhrysa, the former leader of the Vost Miraj, who was forced into hiding after the botched assassination plot against the would-be Emperor. The other is Hahrzan, the wizard mastermind behind a government-sanctioned experiment to trap the spirits of dead dragons in humanoid hosts, and the one tasked with eliminating all evidence of the experiment (including Jeremy Crawford's character, Alex) after the plan fell

out of political favor. Lately he's been experimenting on doppelgangers in an effort to create dragonborn who can naturally alter their forms. Both Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan support the ascension of someone other than the current heir to the imperial throne, and more important, they have formed a secret society that welcomes wizards and rogues in defiance of the traditional imperial caste system, which separates wizards into the arcane caste and rogues into the martial caste.

Using her private network of contacts, Zarkhrysa learned of a secret meeting in Io'galaroth between Oleander and a dragonborn noble named Vahadin, who supports the rise of the imperial heir. She also caught wind of a rumor that Oleander was trying to entice members of various other spy networks to join his guild. Hahrzan took one of Zarkhrysa's dragonborn operatives and turned him into a test subject, imbuing him with doppelganger-like shapeshifting abilities. This mole then assumed the form of a dwarf with known ties to a defunct spy network and made the necessary overtures to attract the attention of Oleander's guild. Hahrzan also gave Zarkhrysa's spy a very powerful bomb, built with the aid of elemental research stolen from Hahrzan's former sect, the Shan Qabal.

That's a lot to take in, I know. But here's the fun part: Oleander believed the dwarf spy would be an asset to his organization and arranged a face-to-face interview. Moreover, Peter wanted the dwarf to be impressed, and so Oleander made sure the dwarf was present during his meeting with Vahadin, the influential dragonborn noble who had powerful connections throughout the empire. When the magic bomb went off, Vahadin's daughter and several high-ranking members of Oleander's guild were killed in the blast. A few were disintegrated. Vahadin survived thanks to one of Oleander's NPC friends, who used his own body as a shield against the collapsing ceiling. Oleander survived because his NPC lieutenant, a blind tiefling named Kzandro, "saw" the dwarf's true form with his magical *robe of eyes* moments before the bomb detonated. Kzandro threw himself between the shapeshifting assassin and Oleander, saving his boss at the cost of his own life.

None of the other player characters were present. The meeting with Vahadin and the disaster that followed played out in the first few minutes of the session while the other players listened and waited for their cues to join the action. After surviving the bomb blast, Oleander paid to have Vahadin's daughter and key members of his organization brought back to lifeassuming their bodies hadn't been disintegrated, of courseincluding the brave Kzandro. As breath returned to Kzandro's body, Oleander leaned down and told him, "You deserve a *raise*."

The attempted assassination of Oleander was, for all intents and purposes, a spectacular teaser for the session. The plot was orchestrated and ultimately thwarted by NPCs, with most of the PCs in no position to alter the outcome. The only one with a "say" in the proceedings was Peter-*slash*-Oleander, and after nearly five years of running the campaign, I have a pretty good sense of what Oleander's about. I left it to Peter to decide whether Oleander would meet with the dwarf spy before or after his

meeting with the dragonborn noble, and I was positively giddy when he opted to have the dwarf attend the meeting, as a way to show how well connected Oleander was. (Ah, the arrogance of epic-level characters!) Without knowing any better, Peter-*slash*-Oleander had played right into the villains' hands. Not only would they kill Oleander, but Oleander's new ally in the Dragovar Empire as wellor so it seemed.

Killing Oleander was never the intent of the teaser, as evidenced by the likable NPC throwing himself in harm's way to keep Oleander alive, not to mention the inevitable raising of the dead. (It's worth noting that, in my campaign, Raise Dead and similar rituals don't always work on NPCs.) My intent, for the record, was to start the session with a bang and set into motion a storyline that would carry us through the evening.

Usually, it's the player characters who are bringing the fight to the bad guys, not the other way around, so having the villains score the first touchdown of the evening was a refreshing change of pace. The assassination attempt gave the player characters a mystery to solve (who wants Oleander dead?) and laid the groundwork for the eventual resurfacing of two major campaign villains whose alliance might come as a surprise to the players, since the PCs had always encountered Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan separately in the past. We're rapidly approaching the campaign's grand finale, so I thought it would be efficient (and fun) to bring these two forces of evil together. Villains are, after all, best encountered in pairs. (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* taught me that.)

LESSONS LEARNED

A *plot device* is something that drives the narrative forward, usually without the involvement or interference of the protagonists. It's the sh*t that happens when the story needs a push. Plot devices come in all guises. One of my favorites in film and television is the character who must suffer and/or die to fuel the protagonist's thirst for revenge. For example, in the 1989 Bond film *License to Kill*, the main villain nonchalantly feeds CIA agent Felix Leiter to sharks (a plot device borrowed from Ian Fleming's novel *Live and Let Die*). This plot device *needs* to exist, for it carries the story and gives James Bond, our hero, all the motivation he needs to make the villain pay.

Another great plot device in TV and film is "the wedding," which is often used as a ratings gimmick to bring lots of characters together into one scene and bring simmering conflicts to a boil. Forgive the bad pun, but how many weddings on television go off without a hitch?

I am torn when it comes to using plot devices. They are, in my mind, a necessary evil. Sometimes you need one to move the campaign from Point X to Point Y, but a poorly staged plot device can be an eye-rolling experience for players and viewed by them as a ham-handed attempt by the DM to shove the adventure down their throats. I think the trick to making a plot device palatable in D&D is to find thingseven small thingsfor the players' characters to do, so that they don't feel completely paralyzed as things begin to happen around them. To take the recent Monday night example, my *plot device du jour* was the deadly explosion in Oleander's lair, but leading up to that moment, Peter got to enjoy a little roleplaying and make at least one decision that could've moderately altered the outcome. It wasn't like Oleander was tied down and blindfolded as events played out. Quite the contrary; without Oleander's contributions, the plot device wouldn't have had as deep an impact.

I like to compare a plot device to a staircase connecting two levels of a dungeon. The only way to get from Level 1 to Level 2 is via the staircase, and the players know as much. They can refuse to go down the stairs, or they can spend hours searching it for traps and other interesting features, but what really needs to happen for the adventure to continue is simple: The adventurers need to walk down those stairs. Ideally, the stairs are nothing more than a means to get the characters where you want them to be AND where the players want them to be. The trick is not to make the players suspicious of the staircase or give them reasons to dawdle or turn back.

I try to use plot devices deliberately and sparingly. As a DM, the last thing I want is to turn my player characters into *spectators*, with zero influence over the unfolding of events. Here are a couple key points I try to keep in mind:

- **The best plot devices don't overstay their welcome.**

- **The best plot devices can be undermined or turned to the party's advantage.**

Crafty players like to tinker with plot devices for their own ends, and in some cases, they can cleverly undo the damage that a plot device causes, thanks to Raise Dead rituals and other resources. That's okay in my book. It doesn't matter that Oleander used magic to undo some of the more devastating results of the bomb blast. The plot device basically accomplished what it set out to do, which was to tell the PCs there's a problem demanding their immediate attention and someone who needs to brought to justice. How they proceed from there is up to them.

After sifting through the wreckage and making a few skill checks, the Monday night group concluded that the magical bomb was built using research stolen from a Shan Qabal library, which pointed the heroes in the direction of Hahrzan. That was my intention all along, of course. Wicked things, plot devices.

Until the next encounter!

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

DEATH-DEFYING D&D

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. In their quest to retrieve the fabled cutlass *Fathomreaver*, the adventurers took their ship into the Elemental Chaos. The vessel cast itself into a swirling vortex, emerged atop a frozen sea, and skidded sidelong across the ice until it came to rest at an angle, tilted on its keel. Trapped in ice all around them were other ships sheathed in glittering white frost, and trapped along with them, a small island bearing a frozen assemblage of ships' hulls that someone had turned into a stronghold.

Not long after the party arrived, an army of frost giants and fire giants marched across the surface of the frozen sea and began laying siege to the stronghold in the hopes of retrieving an artifact that some pirates had stolen from theman *iron flask* containing a trapped god named Tuern. As the giants began pummeling the stronghold with chunks of ice and balls of fire, the heroes stepped out onto the frozen frontier and confronted the threat head-on.

Garrot, a human fighter played by Mat Smith, stood toe-to-toe with the fire giant boss. The fire giant pounded Garrot into the ice repeatedly with the anvil-sized mallet of his mighty hammer, but each time Garrot dropped to 0 hit points, his epic destiny or some healing power would kick in, and he'd spring to his feet . . . much to the fire giant's chagrin. Round after round, Garrot would do exactly what epic-level defenders do draw attacks and soak up damage. And every time he came close to dying, more hit points would magically appear out of nowhere to keep Garrot in the game.

The giants were eventually defeated and driven off. By Mat's reckoning, Garrot took somewhere in the neighborhood of 650 points of damage that night and survived. Speaking as the DM, I don't think I could've killed Garrot if I tried.

A Dungeon Master can sometimes forget that the player characters aren't enemies to be destroyed. Rather, it's the DM's job to create challenges for the heroes to overcome to play the role of the benevolent adversary who secretly roots for the PCs even when the monsters roll critical hits against them. Creating a worthy challenge is a tough tightrope to walk, and believe me, I know it can be frustrating to see the PCs run roughshod over adversaries who should've posed more of a challenge . . . to see a major villain fall in the first round of combat without so much as a memorable one-liner. As the characters advance in level and power, challenging them can be a difficult and frustrating experience. When faced with a seemingly unstoppable party, a DM might begin to wonder whether the system simply breaks down at a certain point. I don't buy it . . . but then, I'm not the sort of DM who blames the system for a poor experience. I would rather build encounters differently next time.

I can tell you that, after running epic-level campaigns both in 3rd Edition and 4th Edition, it's HARD to kill high-level characters. They have so many healing options, resistances, temporary hit points, and ways to pump up their defenses and saving throws that the only sure way to kill them off is to flat-out cheat, or so it can seem. And I can't recommend doing that.

Many DMs struggle with seemingly indestructible characters not because they long to kill them off but because it's damn hard to make them feel threatened. For example, my Wednesday night group includes a goliath battlemind named Ravok who gets a staggering number of temporary hit points every time he drops an enemy to 0 hit points, which basically means that I'm actually doing the party a favor whenever I throw minions onto the battlefield and y'all know how much **I like minions**. I might as well throw healing potions at Ravok instead; he'd get back fewer hit points, and there's a slim chance he might slip on one of the potion bottles and break his neck. The party also has a warforged warden named Fleet, who's a walking tank with seemingly endless healing reserves. I honestly can't remember the last time he fell in combat.

Of course, not all of the characters in the Wednesday night group are as invincible as Ravok or Fleet, but the defenders do a great job of sheltering the physically weaker characters against threats from all quarters. And let's not forget the party cleric, Divin, who has healing up the wazoo. I've run gigantic battles that take entire sessions to play out, and I've seen the party lose thousands of hit points without feeling like the battle might be lost. The only time they get scared is when they're down a player or two, and the party has fewer defenders or leaders to rely on.

So how do I deal with death-defying PCs?

I'm glad you asked . . .

LESSONS LEARNED

There are worse things than death in **D&D**, particularly at higher levels when death is more of an inconvenience than a character-ender. One of them is the risk of failure.

In their quest to find *Fathomreaver*, my Wednesday night heroes braved the dangers of the Elemental Chaos and faced off against a major campaign villain who had the weapon in his clutches. The villain and his crew were defeated, but unfortunately, the cutlass was hurled into a sea of acid and lost. As fate would have it, one of the PCs perished in the battle as well, but what stung the players most was the loss of that sword. They had failed in their quest, and that loss would echo throughout the rest of the campaign.

A lot of players assume that the DM wouldn't give them a quest without expecting the party to succeedeven if it takes a little "DM intervention." After all, the DM has a vested interest in ensuring the party's success, since completion of a quest makes players feel good and often helps move the campaign along. Humbug, I say. Victory is hollow without a genuine risk of failure. If the party fails in its task, maybe their hometown is pillaged by orcs. Maybe the king is assassinated. Maybe the evil demon prince is released from its ancient prison. Maybe the artifact they seek is destroyed right before their eyes.

For a long time, I struggled with creating worthy adversaries for my nigh-invincible player characters until I realized that my time was better spent coming up with interesting quests that couldn't be completed simply by slaughtering everything in sight. When I sit down to create an encounter or adventure, I'm not the least bit concerned with how tough it might be or how likely I am to kill off one or more party members. I set out to create encounters with memorable antagonists, plenty of roleplaying opportunities, and a smattering of complications that add surprise and tension to the proceedings. I also present moral dilemmas and problems that can't be hacked with a greataxe or blown away with a spell. Failure (unlike death) cannot be undone with a Raise Dead spell, and that's scary. Failure (unlike death) can have campaign-rippling consequences.

What's fascinating to me is that my players would rather face death than failure, and that fear of failure makes them take greater risks that put their death-defying characters in harm's way. That's more than a touch ironic, wouldn't you agree?

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

ARTICLE

GOLDFINGERS

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Nick DiPetrillo plays a warforged artificer who doesn't have any friends. The other characters tolerate him because he infuses their weapons with lots of fat, juicy bonuses. The warforged is also a bit of a sociopath, so he doesn't really care what others think of him anyway. The idea of "friendship" does not compute.

Recently, Nick's character was swallowed whole by another PC who was transformed (unwillingly) into a giant star spawn resembling a purple worm. (That's what happens when you have a bunch of purple worm miniatures lying around.) The "star worm" had a trans-dimensional gullet that spit the warforged onto a far-flung moon with very little gravity and even less air. Fortunately, warforged don't breathe or require sustenance. However, the bitter cold of space proved a touch uncomfortable.

The moon was covered with the dust and desiccated bones of millions of dead corpses from across the multiverse. Nick decided that his warforged had found paradise . . . a quiet demesne far removed from the tiresome politics, conspiracies, and quests of Iomandra, and a realm he could call his own where enemies dare not follow. After figuring out a way to survive the cold, the warforged began to sift through the dust in search of artifacts and relics. Much to his surprise, he found a dismembered warforged arm made of gold how lucky is that? (It comes with lots of mystery, too. Who was the arm's previous owner, what happened to that warforged, and are there more golden body parts hidden beneath the dust?) Nick immediately had his character amputate one of his own arms and attach the golden arm in its

place. I, as the DM, was pleased. I was also left with the challenge of determining what powers or properties if any the golden arm possessed.

I have decided to incorporate a particular element from the current D&D Next playtest documents into my 4th Edition campaign. I'm glad the campaign still has a few months of life left in it because the next iteration of the game isn't so far in it's development that I'm ready to kick off a full-blown "D&D Next" campaign anyway.

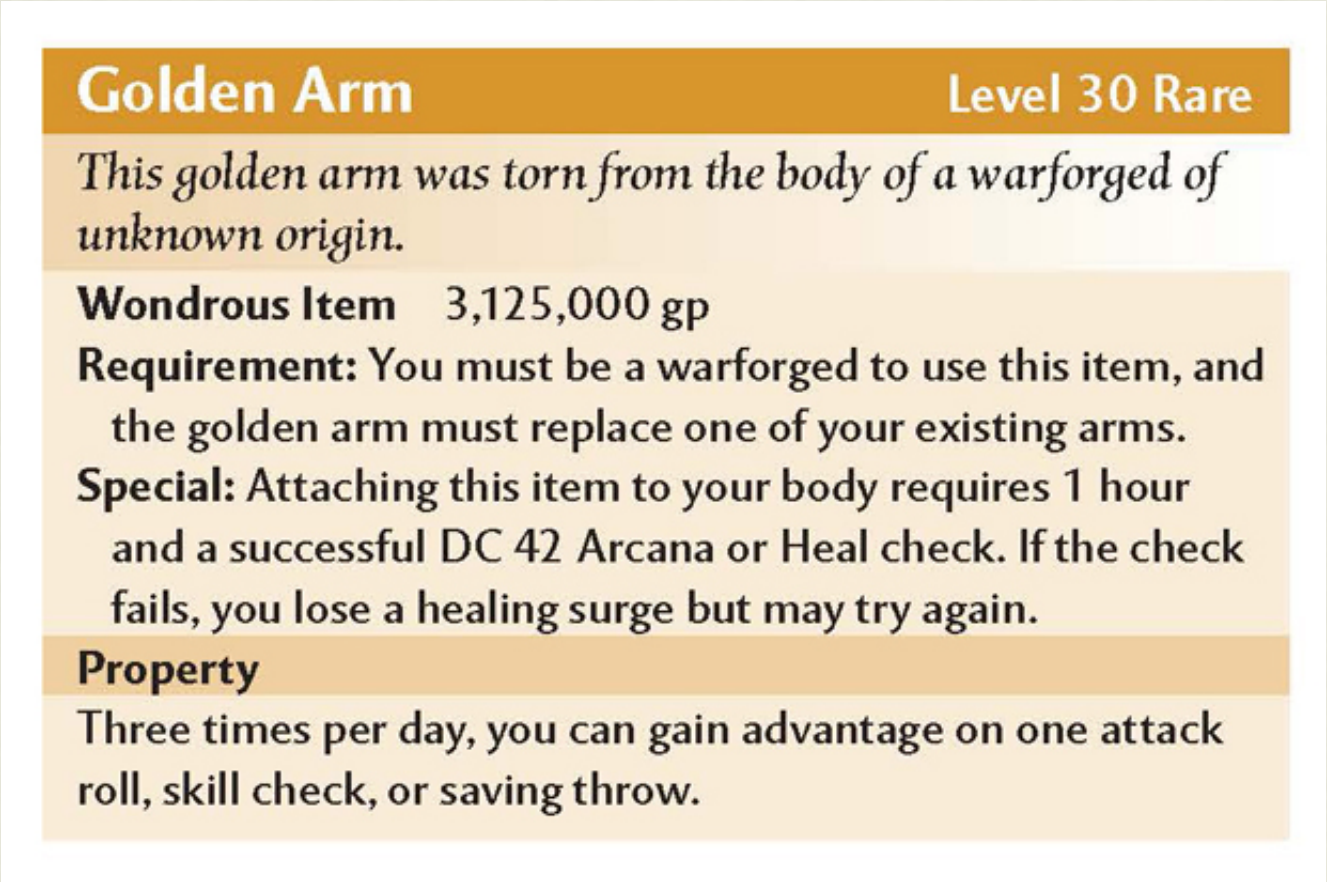
As the master of my own campaign world, I'm free to plunder from past and future editions of the game as I see fit, and that's really the point of this article. My 3rd Edition campaign, Arveniar, began as a 3rd Edition playtest, and toward the end I started to allow some 4E-isms into the game. My 4th Edition campaign, Iomandra, started as a playtest of the 4th Edition rules, and once again I'm pulling in elements from the next iteration of the game. When the time comes to start my next campaign, it will almost certainly be a D&D Next game, but I see no reason why I can't take a few of its rules for a "test drive."

D&D Next introduces a game term called *advantage*, which is similar in function to 4th Edition's combat advantage but different in execution. Just like combat advantage, a creature can gain advantage in different ways, but the benefit of gaining advantage in D&D Next is that you get to roll two d20s instead of one and take the higher result. (For example, a character might gain advantage when attacking a prone enemy with a melee weapon.) The corollary mechanic, disadvantage, works similarly, except that you must take the lower result. Attacking while prone, for example, is a surefire way to gain disadvantage.

I decided to work the new advantage mechanic into my 4th Edition campaign in a somewhat limited fashion using Nick's golden arm as the means. I briefly entertained the notion of swapping out the 4th Edition combat advantage mechanic and using the new advantage/disadvantage system in a more widespread fashion, but making such a large-scale systemic change months before the campaign's end seemed like a bad call. Also, I wasn't prepared to deal with potential game balance issues; after all, 4th Edition wasn't designed with that system in mind (although there are plenty of "roll two dice, take the higher/lower result" mechanics lurking in the edition). Nah. Better to let the warforged artificer tinker with the mechanic for a while and see what happens.

Here's what the *golden arm* looks like written up as a simple, straightforward, and

undeveloped 4th Edition magic item:



Golden Arm Level 30 Rare

This golden arm was torn from the body of a warforged of unknown origin.

Wondrous Item 3,125,000 gp

Requirement: You must be a warforged to use this item, and the golden arm must replace one of your existing arms.

Special: Attaching this item to your body requires 1 hour and a successful DC 42 Arcana or Heal check. If the check fails, you lose a healing surge but may try again.

Property

Three times per day, you can gain advantage on one attack roll, skill check, or saving throw.

So far in the campaign, the arm's property has been used once only. Nick made an attack, pulled out two d20s with a twinkle of excitement in his eyes, and rolled a natural "1" and a natural "2" on the dice. Not great. Just goes to show you that even a kick-ass magic item can't save you from angry dice gods.

LESSONS LEARNED

The D&D Next playtest documents are out there for everyone to play with. I encourage any DM who's not running a D&D Next game to see if there's something in those documents worth exploring for his or her current campaign, be it 3rd Edition, 4th Edition, or whatever. I'm betting there is.

My next campaign is still several months away, and as much as my Monday night players seem to enjoy the current campaign, some of them are chomping at the bit to make new characters and start fresh with a new set of rules and new character options to explore. Anything I can do to whet their appetites seems like it's worth trying, but I don't want to turn my Iomandra campaign into something it's not. So, at the same time I urge you to explore what D&D Next has to offer, I caution you against implementing widespread rules changes to your campaign unless you're fairly certain the risk is worth the reward.

Until the next encounter!

ARTICLE

ACTS I, II, AND III

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT Act One. The heroes search for their elusive enemy, Sea King Senestrago, on the island of Whitestag, where the evil merchant has gone to ground after losing most of his fleet in a daring bid to wipe out several of his rivals. The heroes believe that Senestrago might be holed up in a warehouse belonging to the widow of a deceased trader who secretly worked for Senestrago. A search of the warehouse turns up no signs of their quarry but yields two clues: a barrel of sea salt concealing the mummified corpse of the widow's dead husband, and a wooden holy symbol of Melora lying nearby. The heroes try to question the widow at her estate, but she's gone horseback riding, and her household servants have no clue when she'll be back. It occurs to the heroes that she might be meeting with a secret lover, namely Senestrago. Searching the desk in the widow's parlor, they find scrolls indicating that large donations were made in her husband's name to three local churches (dedicated to Erathis, Melora, and Pelor, respectively).

Act Two. Divin, the party's half-elf cleric of Melora (played by Curt Gould), doesn't know what to make of the wooden holy symbol found at the warehouse. An eladrin seer offers a cryptic clue: *A lightning strike points the way, but beware the unfaithful.* The heroes check out the church of Melora first and notice that the church's steeple is scarred by fire and partially collapsed, as though it was recently struck by lightning. The heroes approach with caution. The resident priest, Davian Smyte, claims the steeple was damaged in a storm, but it doesn't take Divin long to realize the priest is

a charlatan. It's also clear that the party has found Senestrago's secret lair. "Father" Smyte leads a small gang of halfling assassins disguised as altar boys and a trio of human thugs posing as gravediggers. A fight ensues, and the good guys prevail. Not only thatthe heroes discover a secret staircase in the church that connects to a hidden sea cave. But still no sign of Senestrago!

Act Three. The heroes interrogate captives, hoping to learn some clue to Senestrago's whereabouts. The gods smile on them as they see two figures approaching on horseback, galloping toward the church. One of them appears to be Senestrago, the other a dragonborn bodyguard. The heroes set an ambush, but Senestrago realizes something is amiss and tries to flee. With the aid of various epic-level powers, the party manages to thwart Senestrago's escape and quickly slay him. Much to their surprise, the dead Sea King transforms into a dragonborn before their eyes. Could it be that Senestrago was a dragonborn all along? Not likely. Based on other events happening in the campaign, the characters conclude that the Dragovar Empire's imperial spy agency replaced Senestrago with one of their own to sow discord among the Sea Kings and shatter their tenuous alliance. But is the real Senestrago alive or dead? The plot thickens . . .

A lot of scriptwriters, playwrights, and novelists use a three-act narrative structure to tell their stories. They use the first act to introduce the important characters and set up the conflict. The second act ratchets up the tension as things spiral from bad to worse and the story heads toward its climax. The third act typically resolves the conflict and provides a worthy denouement, giving the story a sense of closure or, in some cases, a hook upon which to hang a sequel.

I am a diehard adventure designer. I've been writing adventures for almost thirty years, and I've got more adventure ideas in my head than I can ever commit to paper. Lately, however, I've turned to screenwriting as a second hobby, and I've concluded that scriptwriting and adventure writing have a lot in common, insofar as they're both heavily structured forms of writing. The structure is far less malleable and forgiving than, say, the structure of a novel or short story.

The first thing a fledgling screenwriter learns is that 99% of all movies cleave to a three-act format. The reason is simple: it's a tried-and-true narrative structure that most humans on the planet find intuitive and pleasing. We're all wired to think of a story as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. Conflict, climax, conclusion. It's that simple. You can't have the conclusion before the climax, or the climax before the conflict. Screenwriters can tamper with the traditional three-act structure, but deviation often leads to a narrative that feels uneven or unnatural.

My favorite game sessions are the ones that have a readily identifiable beginning, middle, and end. I like to think of them as stand-alone episodes of a serialized television show. My players like them because they get what feels like a complete adventure in a single session, as opposed to a slice of a much larger, seemingly never-ending adventure (which is what a campaign often feels like).

Our most recent Wednesday session started with a clear quest (catch Sea King Senestrago) and ended with the completion of that quest (with a surprise twist at the very end). By the end of the session, I wanted the characters to come face-to-face

with their quarry, although the actual outcome was far from predetermined. (For one thing, had my players made poor decisions or bad die rolls, the villain could've easily escaped.) If you've ever tried writing an adventure, a movie script, or a novel, you know as well as I do that the hard part isn't the beginning or ending; it's the stuff in the middle that takes the most brainpower. As a point of fact, more writers get hopelessly lost in the middle of a script or novel than at the beginning or the end. Similarly, a lot of DMs have really clear ideas of how and where to start their campaigns, and they can imagine how their campaigns should end, but there's a vast and empty expanse in between that needs to be filled with *something*, and it's easy to become lost or overwhelmed.

Fortunately, I have some tricks that I use to help me get the characters from Point A to Point Z. It begins by imagining the game session as a three-act play.

LESSONS LEARNED

If you've been following this column, you know that I "sketch out" every game session on a single one-sided sheet of paper that contains very basic information, including the names of important NPCs and a recap of important events that occurred prior to the session that might be relevant. This single sheet of paper contains everything I need to "wing" the adventure.

My recent foray into screenwriting has reminded me to think of game sessions as three-act narratives, and I've begun adding a brief three-act summary at the bottom of my page of notes. Here's the one-sheet I created for the Wednesday night adventure described above:

"Long Live the King"

Previously in Iomandra . . .
Sea King Senestrago tried to wipe out his rivals during a summit meeting at Krakenholt, but ended up losing most of his fleet. Senestrago escaped after the heroes stormed his flagship, the Advantage. Several months later, with the help of a doppelganger spy named Leshiv, the heroes "captured" the sister of one of Senestrago's few remaining loyal captains and used her as leverage to persuade the captain to divulge the Sea King's whereabouts.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (in alphabetical order)

Deimos(a.k.a. Sea King Impstinger), male tiefling sorcerer (played by Chris Youngs)

Divin, male half-elf cleric of Melora (played by Curt Gould)

Fleet, warforged warden (played by Nacime Khemis)

Ravok, male goliath battlemind (played by Andrew Finch)

Vargas (a.k.a. Sea King Silvereye), male eladrin wizard/avenger (played by Rodney Thompson)

IMPORTANT NPCs

Davian Smyte, male human mercenary disguised as a priest of Melora

Nyrrska, male dragonborn ex-assassin and Sea King Impstinger's first mate

Leshiv, doppelganger spymaster working for Sea King Impstinger

Vivian Tattersail, female human widow (former wife of trader Armin Tattersail)

Hobbs, Lady Tattersail's likeable gardener

Starra, female eladrin fortuneteller

and

Evan Senestrago, male human Sea King (actually a dragonborn doppelganger and Vost Azaan agent)

EPISODE SUMMARY
The hunt for Sea King Senestrago leads heroes to an epic confrontation on the island of Whitestag.

Act I: The Warehouse
The heroes track Senestrago to a warehouse owned by the widow of a deceased human trader named Armin Tattersail. They find the dead trader's mummified corpse hidden in a barrel of salt, as well as a holy symbol of Melora accidentally left behind by one of Senestrago's henchmen.

Act II: Wrath of Melora
The holy symbol leads heroes to the local temple of Melora that serves as Senestrago's redoubt. The church's steeple was recently struck by lightning during a storm (a sign of Melora's displeasure, perhaps). The resident "priest," Davian Smyte, works for Senestrago and tries to keep the heroes from discovering Senestrago's secret redoubta sea cave hidden below the temple.

Act III: The King Is Dead, Long Live the King
"Senestrago" returns to the church after a clandestine meeting with Vivian Tattersail. He tries to flee on horseback rather than fight against overwhelming opposition. In truth, he's actually a dragonborn doppelganger working for the Vost Azaan, a mysterious new sect whose members are culled from the Dragovar Empire's arcane and martial castes. If the heroes interrogate the dragonborn, they uncover a plot to keep the Sea Kings from forging a powerful new alliance.

When writing the text for "Act I," I try to imagine how the session might begin and what needs to happen to drive the heroes toward their ultimate goal. "Act II" is where I add complications that stand between the player characters and their goal. "Act III"

describes the likely climax and aftermath of the adventure. These are all guidelines, of course; sometimes player decisions and actions will take the game session in an unexpected direction, but at least I've thought about how the session might play out.

Ignoring the three-act structure for a moment, I could've created a much more straightforward adventure by having the characters encounter Senestrago in the warehouse, dispensing with the rich widow, the clues, and the temple of Melora. That's the equivalent of going from Point A to Point D, without bothering with Points B or C. I can imagine situations in which a more straightforward, mystery-free plot is preferable. However, I wanted Senestrago to be a "moving target," and the three-act structure forced me to think of complications that made logical sense in terms of the story.

In the Wednesday night game, everything the heroes are told leads them to the obvious hideout the warehouse. But the villain isn't there, and so the players are faced with their first complication. Fortunately, a thorough search of the warehouse yields a clue: a discarded holy symbol of Melora. This clue (in theory) leads the party to the villain's true hideout below the temple of Melora. Time for another unexpected complication: the villain isn't there, either. Fortunately for the heroes, they don't have to wait long for the villain to show up, and if they're clever, they can catch the villain by surprise. At last, we come to the climax! Let the dice fall where they may.

Creating a complication is easy: I think about how the adventure would play out if everything fell neatly into the players' laps, and then I add a little bad luck or bad timing, a red herring or distraction, or something else to give the players pause. It can be as simple as having the villain not be where they expect him to be. Some players find too many complications annoying, so I try to keep the number small. For example, I planned to have a squad of dragonborn assassins hidden in the sea cave

under the church of Melora, but I realized the encounter would make the session run long, so I cut it. It would've added a nice bit of foreshadowing (what are Dragovar assassins doing in Senestrago's secret lair?), but it would've added another hour to a game session already packed with intrigue.

Here are a couple things to keep in mind when thinking of a game session as a three-act play:

- **The three-act structure should be mostly invisible to your players**
- **You don't need very many complications (two or three, at most)**
- **It's okay to add or change things as the session unfolds**

When it's working perfectly, the three-act format provides a framework that makes the game session feel to players like an adventure unto itself, with a satisfying beginning, middle, and ending. Even if the adventure is far from over, there's still a sense that the characters have reached the end of one chapter, and most people would rather fight their way to the end of a chapter than stop somewhere in the middle.

For the most part, the three-act format is meant to help you as a storyteller. The players might never know that you're using it as a tool to help you plot out your weekly adventures, and that's probably a good thing. It's also good that you keep an open mind and not let the three-act structure rule the game session. If the adventure takes an unexpected turn, you'll need to improvise. Case in point, I thought the wooden holy symbol of Melora found in the warehouse was a strong enough clue to point heroes straight to the church, but they went after Lady Tattersail instead, and it took them a little time (and a gentle nudge) to realize that the holy symbol not the corpse in the barrel was the real clue to finding Senestrago's secret lair.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

SPIN THE CLICHE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

Monday Night. The characters have been searching for Hahrzan, a dragonborn wizard who's experimenting on doppelgangers in order to create a "super race" of dragonborn shapeshifters (dragonborn that can naturally alter their appearance). When you get right down to it, it's a story as old as Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* about a mad wizard and his fiendish experiment. However, several elements to the story make it unique, one of them being the villain himself.

A botched alchemical experiment several years ago left Hahrzan unable to breathe air. To survive, he is forced to inhale a gaseous admixture, and he must wear a sealed leather body suit and gas mask, with a nest of hoses attached to a pump strapped to his back. When he is first bloodied, his suit ruptures, creating an aura of poisonous gas around him. Add to that a twisted sense of patriotism and a determination to replace key figures in the government with "doppelborn" operatives, and you have an antagonist who's a far cry from a cackling wizard in a pointy hat.

One of my favorite books is *Save the Cat!* a how-to guide written by the late, great spec screenwriter Blake Snyder. It carries a somewhat immodest (yet entirely deserved) subtitle: *The Last Book On Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need.* In it, Snyder says:

> *A screenwriter's daily conundrum is how to avoid cliche. You can be near the cliche, you can dance around it, you can run right up to it and almost embrace it. But at the last second you must turn away. You must give it a twist. And insisting on those*

> *twists, defying that inner voice that says, "Oh, well, no one will notice," is a universal struggle that good storytellers have been fighting forever.*

Snyder goes on to say that every Hollywood film fits snugly into one of ten categories based on its setup and plot. For example, *Jaws*, *Alien*, and *Fatal Attraction* are all "Monster in the House" films, while *Die Hard*, *Titanic*, and *Schindler's List* are all "Dude with a Problem" films. He also goes on to illustrate how some films are, beat for beat, the exact same movie only with different titles and characters.

Snyder's storytelling insight applies as much to DMing as screenwriting. Although there's no limit to the number of **D&D** adventures that can be created, the number of adventure setups and plots is remarkably short. There's the rescue adventure, the mystery adventure, the kill-the-monster adventure, and a handful of others. For every category, there are plenty of examples. However, if you're a DM looking to delight your players with a "slay the dragon" adventure, you'll need something more than just a dragon in a cave. A great adventure needs elements that make it stand out as a unique piece of work, even if the basic story is a cliche.

Let's run with the "slay the dragon" scenario:

A red dragon terrorizes a small kingdom. Agents of the king hire brave adventurers to mount an expedition to the dragon's lair, slay the creature, and recover its treasure for the crown. In exchange, the adventurers get fame, experience, and a portion of the dragon's trove.

Without altering the basic storyline, a DM can add elements to the adventure to make it unique, turning a groaner into something that feels fresh. Here are some examples:

"“ The adventure takes place in the dead of winter, and the dragon has taken to hibernating in its lair. Snow and blizzards make the trek particularly dangerous.

"“ Two guides are tasked with leading the PCs safely to the dragon's lair. The guides are a pair of bickering dwarves, one of whom thinks the other is sleeping with his sister. As the characters get closer to the dragon's lair, the truth comes out, and the characters must break up a fight between them.

"“ The dragon has a bit of history. When it was younger, it served as a mount for a brutal hobgoblin warlord who died in battle. The dragon keeps the warlord's skeletal remains (and possessions) hidden in its lair, and maybe even talks to them.

"“ The dragon has allied itself with an evil wizard who is teaching it how to cast spells. The wizard has been living in exile for years and plans to win the dragon's trust.

"“ The dragon is extorting a local village, threatening to burn it to the ground if the villagers don't provide it with tribute in the form of cows and sheep. The characters have the option of slipping past some of the dragon's defenses by posing as shepherds delivering a flock of sheep to the dragon's den.

"“ The dragon has a crystal orb through which it communes with the ruler of an enemy kingdom. This evil king or queen is using the dragon to spread terror and foment unrest as a prelude to invasion.

"“ The dragon's cave provides access into a lost dwarven tomb, within which the characters find an intelligent magic axe. The axe might have a quest of its own, or it might be useful in defeating the dragon.

"“ The dragon's lair contains a magical waterfall that serves as a fey crossing. Characters can use this as a sanctuary if they're really hurt, and there might be a dryad or nymph there to advise or hinder them.

Granted, not all of these ideas are original (the crystal orb idea is clearly inspired by the Palantiri in *The Lord of the Rings*), but I think some of them are pretty good. This sort of exercise is called "spinning the cliche." It's fun to take a tired **D&D** cliche and find ways to spin or twist it into something original. In my "slay the dragon" adventure, only half of the twists are directly related to the dragon itself; the rest have to do with the dragon's lair or ancillary elements of the adventure. It just goes to show that you can twist the framing elements of the story just as much as its core elements to surprise and delight your players.

My ultimate goal, as the DM, is to find the perfect spin or twist to make my players forget that they're partaking in yet another "rescue the _____" adventure or "kill the _____" quest. If they're concerned about their characters freezing to death or bemused by a pair of bickering dwarves, then the cliche can do its work, and my players are none the wiser.

LESSONS LEARNED

I love creating adventures, and once I realized there aren't very many different adventure plots to choose from, I became obsessed with finding clever ways to spin these well-worn stories. For my Monday night group, I wanted to turn a plot about an "evil wizard's experiment" into something that felt original.

Really good players can spin a cliche just as handily. When you look at the character options available, certain cliches immediately rise to the surface, from the sly rogue who pilfers coin pouches off drunken tavern patrons, to the holier-than-thou paladin who turns a blind eye to the rogue's shenanigans. A clever player knows all the tired character cliches and looks for a twist or a spin. As a DM, you can learn a lot just by observing what these players come up with.

"Give me the same thing . . . only different." According to Blake Snyder, that's what storytelling has always been about. There's nothing wrong with sending adventurers after red dragons and evil wizards. Once you realize you're wrestling with a cliche, you can start to spin it around in your mind, and suddenly the creative possibilities begin to bubble to the surface. If you don't believe me, try this exercise: *There's a ruined tower on a hill just outside town. The locals believe it's haunted, and occasionally strange lights can be seen floating amid the ruins at night. The adventurers are hired to investigate.* It's a classic "haunted house" scenario. How would you spin the cliche?

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

THE THIRD RULE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. As the campaign draws to a close, the epic-level adventurers still have a lot of unfinished quests. Fortunately, they have a pretty good idea who the good guys are, who the bad guys are, and where the bad guys are hiding. In fact, there isn't a lot of investigation left. The characters are powerful and wealthy enough to sustain a veritable network of underlings, including spies and well-connected information gatherers. One of their finest is a doppelganger NPC named Leshiv, who used to work for one of the campaign villains until the party realized that his loyalty could be bought.

The party first "acquired" Leshiv in the middle of paragon tier, but it took a while for Leshiv to demonstrate his trustworthiness and discretion. I basically use him to feed reliable information to the PCs, particularly when the players are at their wits' end or distracted by other concerns. Recently, he's even joined the party as an NPC companion, putting his shapechanging talents to good use. Now that the party trusts Leshiv, I'm not about to betray that trust.

Trust is a hard thing to come by in most seasoned adventuring parties. ("Seasoned" is a polite way of saying groups with more than ten collective years of **D&D** gaming experience.) Putting aside those backstabbing, self-serving PCs who like to stir up inter-party conflict with their crap (something which most seasoned groups barely tolerate), there's also a profound lack of trust in the NPCs. Why? Because DMs can't resist the urge to stage encounters or build adventures around an NPC's betrayal.

Some DMs do it because the theme of betrayal is nearly irresistible; others want to see how characters react when the party's trust is violated. I'm guilty of planting seeds of betrayal myself, so I'm not casting any stones. Heck, I'm not even saying it's a bad thing, particularly given how prevalent the theme of betrayal appears in fiction and real-world history. But in the **D&D** game, NPCs betraying PCs creates trust issues, and this can sour players on the campaign and adversely affect their treatment of NPCs thereafter.

The truth is, my campaign has three kinds of NPCs:

- Those who are clearly and consistently trustworthy
- Those who are clearly and consistently untrustworthy
- Those whose trustworthiness cannot be easily or reliably ascertained

One could apply this same schema to real-life humans, by the way. I've met people who are so plainly untrustworthy that I won't leave them alone in a room that contains anything I deem of value. There are others I trust implicitly and have no reason to believe will ever betray that trust. And then there's the other 98% of the world's population who are closer to being actual *human beings*, capable of being both trustworthy and untrustworthy depending on the circumstances.

My **D&D** campaign weighs the percentages more equally. I have a higher percentage of clearly trustworthy NPCs and clearly untrustworthy NPCs, mostly because I believe players get tired of psychoanalyzing every NPC they meet. They don't want to be concerned about some nameless dude who just sold them a horse to replace Kikkers McHoofenstein, the paladin's trusty mount that was devoured by a bulette in the last adventure. They don't want to cast *detect poison* on every flagon of ale they get from the tight-lipped half-orc proprietor of the Fat Fanny Tavern, either. And last but not least, they'd rather not have to do a background check on every hapless sod that pitches them a new quest. The flipside of the coin is that players like crossing paths with NPCs who are so blatantly untrustworthy that they practically have the words LYIN and SCUM tattooed on their fingers. It makes the NPC predictable and easy to deal with.

In my campaign, I aim for equal percentages of obviously trustworthy NPCs, obviously untrustworthy NPCs, and everyone else. That way, my players know (or if not "know" at least have a sense) that one-third of the NPCs they encounter are wearing their trustworthiness on their proverbial sleeves. This is oddly reassuring. After all, the percentage is clearly higher than what players typically experience in the real world, making my campaign a less stressful place to hang out. (Granted, the chances of being eaten alive by monsters on 21st century Earth is much lower than 8th century Iomandra, although one must still be wary of sharks, lunatics, drunk morons, bureaucrats, water moccasins, muggers, Muggles, and other potential threats.)

Wholly trustworthy NPCs are worth their weight in gold. They remind your players that the campaign world is worth saving, and they often come with a built-in sympathy and appreciation for the characters and all that they do to make the world a safer place for civilized folk. In my Monday night campaign, there's a blind tiefling

rogue NPC named Kzandro Kazanaar. The party saved his life and furnished him with a *robe of eyes* so that he can see, and so now he serves them as a "field agent," doing the sorts of investigative work and mystery-solving the epic-level PCs might have done back in heroic and paragon tier. He's similar in many respects to the Wednesday night group's doppelganger spy, Leshiv. Were Kzandro to suddenly betray the party, my players would never forgive me (nor should they) because it's a clear misrepresentation of Kzandro's character. He's earned and deserves the party's trust.

On the other side of the "trust scale," we have Zaidi Arychosa, a tiefling soprano with known ties to the Horned Alliance, a guild of tiefling assassins and spies. Zaidi entertains the guild's influential business associates and spends much of her time with the guildmaster, Zaibon Krinvazh, who collects and bleaches the bones of his enemies. Everything about Zaidi (and Zaibon) screams "Untrustworthy!"

And then there are NPCs such as Lorelei Kalas, a savvy sea merchant who commands hundreds of loyal ship captains. She's demonstrated over and over that she wants to be the most powerful Sea King in the world, but is she trustworthy? Well, that depends. When faced with a clear and present danger to her fleet, she can be trusted to act against it. But can the characters trust her enough to form an alliance against a common enemy? Well . . . there's no easy answer. The heroes have been Sea King Kalas's rivals in the past, but right now their fleet is smaller than hers, and they're doing more good than harm, so she leaves them well enough alone. And if they were to ask her for help, there's a decent chance she would provide it. But there's also the risk that something might cause her to turn against the party, and so they are duly cautious in their dealings with her.

LESSONS LEARNED

As much as I hate falling back on color metaphors, every campaign needs white, black, and shades of gray. Just as in film and fiction, there are supporting characters who are easy to read and others who aren't. One example that springs to mind is *True Romance*, written by Quentin Tarantino and directed by the late, great Tony Scott. This film is an object lesson in the importance of creating a world that contains supporting characters that fall into all three categories of trustworthiness.

The Trustworthy: Dennis Hopper plays Clifford Worley, the film's likeable father figure â€” clearly trustworthy (which is doubly impressive given Hopper's history of untrustworthy character portrayals). Ditto for Christian Slater's goofy sidekick, Dick Ritchie, played by Michael Rapaport. (Incidentally, Rapaport has made a career playing this kind of character. In the less memorable shark film *Deep Blue Sea*, his goofy sidekick actually utters the line, "Trust me. Why? Because I'm trust-WORTHY."

And we believe it because it's true.)

The Untrustworthy: Gary Oldman plays Drexl Spivey, a white drug dealer who thinks he's black; he's probably the most blatantly untrustworthy character in the film. We also have Bronson Pinchot's cocaine-snorting weasel, Elliot Blitzer. And let's not forget Christopher Walken, who, with Dennis Hopper, delivers what many film aficionados consider one of the best scenes in modern cinema. Is Walken's character, Sicilian mob enforcer Vincenzo Coccotti, trustworthy? Walken tells you within his first minute of screen time when he says, "Sicilians are great liars. The best in the world."

The Uncertain: Brad Pitt plays a couch-potato pothead named Floyd. We're not too sure about his trustworthiness. Ditto for the film's two bullying cops, played by Tom Sizemore and the late Chris Penn. Their trustworthiness seems to vacillate depending on the scene and the circumstances. The same is true of Saul Rubinek's egocentric, stick-to-his-guns film producer character, Lee Donowitz.

If you haven't seen the film, you are missing a sublime story . . . not to mention cameos by Val Kilmer and James Gandolfini â€" two brilliant bits of casting that represent polar opposites on the trustworthiness scale.

What *True Romance* reinforces in my mind is the audience's need to quickly identify characters they can trust, characters they can't trust, and characters they're not sure can be trusted. The same rule (which might be too strong a word, but I'll use it anyway) applies to supporting characters in a **D&D** campaign. I think it's a mistake to flood your campaign with *potentially* trustworthy or untrustworthy NPCs. It creates too much uncertainty. The players need a larger group of supporting characters they can trust and who won't willingly betray that trust . . . and not just no-names who run the local taverns and plow the fields but also important "named" NPCs whom the party can rely on to accomplish tasks on their behalf. They also need some readily identifiable untrustworthy NPCs to spurn.

The "third rule" works well for me:

- One-third of my NPCs are identifiably and unfailingly trustworthy
- One-third of my NPCs are identifiably and unfailingly untrustworthy
- One-third of my NPCs fall somewhere in between these extremes on the "trust scale"

My players don't fuss over an NPC's betrayal because they're either expecting it or they know they're dealing with a member of that last third of the campaign's NPC population. Usually if there are "trust issues" to be worked out, it's within the party itself. If you want to read more about the Wednesday night group's inter-party trust issues, **click here**.

And for the record, there isn't a horse named Kikkers McHoofenstein or a drinking hole called the Fat Fanny Tavern in the Iomandra campaign, although if you ask my Wednesday night players, they'll say there probably should be.

Until the next encounter!

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

GANG AFT AGLEY

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Paragon tier. The characters thwart Sea King Senestrago's plot to sink an island using a very expensive ritual and several catastrophic dragon eggs plucked from the Elemental Chaos. Not only that, but the PCs manage to steal one of the eggs and tuck it away in a *bag of holding* for safekeeping. Two years and fifteen levels later, the egg finally comes into play.

Fast forward to epic level: The characters are told that two major campaign villains, Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa, are imbuing dragonborn spies with doppelganger-like traits, allowing them to shapechange naturally. Moreover, Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa plan to use these shapeshifting spies in a nefarious plot to seize control of the Dragovar Empire. Shortly after the spies are sent on their way, the heroes corner the villains in a battered citadel along the coast of an island ruled by a green dragon named Emerlas. The citadel, damaged years ago by a tidal wave, still has some ancient magic on it that guards against scrying and teleportation magic hence the decision to use it for a not-so-secret rendezvous.

In anticipation of a glorious battle in the ruined stronghold, I drew a multi-level map on a wet-erase battle map. I went so far as to show the various gaps in the walls and floors through which characters could maneuver, allowing me to place well-armed minions on multiple levels. I also added the island's green dragon overlord to the roster of bad guys in attendance, just because fighting a dragon is always fun.

Rather than assault the citadel as I'd anticipated, most of the PCs hung back while the halfling rogue, Oleander, mounted his *ebony fly* (everyone's favorite *figurine of wondrous power*), flew over the citadel, and dropped the aforementioned catastrophic dragon egg into the roofless structure, whereupon it exploded.

The Monday night group had seen a catastrophic dragon egg explode once before, so they were aware of its destructive capabilities (in my campaign, anyway). Still, they were surprised when the citadel collapsed in on itself, burying the villains under tons of rock. Everyone inside took 500 points of damage. Hahrzan, Zarkhrysa, and their forces were killed outright. Only the green dragon survived. Bloodied by the explosion, it burrowed out from under the debris and chased after Oleander. However, Oleander was able to catch up to the rest of the party, who finished off the wounded dragon in one round. Then they cast Speak with Dead on the dragon's corpse, learned where Emerlas hid his treasure, and looted the dragon's stash.

You know what they say about the best-laid plans.

It took me about thirty minutes to draw the map of the citadel. Pity I never had a chance to use it . . . but that's the way the castle crumbles. A smarter DM probably would've remembered that the party had a Weapon of Mass Destruction from an earlier adventure; usually, my players are more apt to forget about that stuff than I am. On this particular occasion, however, they had the perfect work-around to my clever plans.

The REALLY interesting thing is that my players had fun ruining my plans and circumventing the requisite battle with the bad guys. They spent most of the remainder of the game session excavating the corpses of the bad guys and casting Speak with Dead rituals to glean information about their wicked plans. Oleander's bomb-drop had saved them hours of dice rolling while basically achieving nearly optimal results. (I say "nearly" because a good-aligned NPC a captive of the bad guys was inadvertently killed in the blast. Fortunately, the PCs were able to raise this NPC from the dead.)

As one of my players put it afterward, "Cheating is fun!"

In the end, that's the important thing: the players had *fun*. So what if I wasted 30

minutes prepping a useless map. Maybe I can put that map to use somehow in my Wednesday night game!

Another thing worth mentioning is that the destruction of the citadel and the deaths of Hahrzan and Zarkhrysa didn't spell the end of the adventure. The "doppelborn" spies are still out there, for one thing, and rumor is they're backed by two powerful and unscrupulous dragonborn noble families. (There's a campaign motto buried in there somewhere: Kill two villains, and four more sprout in their place!) Oh, and the party hasn't seen the last of Hahrzan or Zarkhrysa, either. One of the wonderful things about epic tier is that the villains tend to be as resourceful as the PCs. Hahrzan's an archwizard with a clone or two, and Zarkhrysa stole an *hourglass talisman* from the party's rogue a few levels ago. This time-traveling device allows its user to step back in time for one hour. Using the talisman, Zarkhrysa murdered herself in the past, stuffed her own corpse into a *bag of holding*, brought it back to the present, and raised it from the dead . . . effectively creating a "temporal twin" in the present timeline.

"Cheating is fun," indeed!

LESSONS LEARNED

Here are this week's takeaways, in three nutshells:

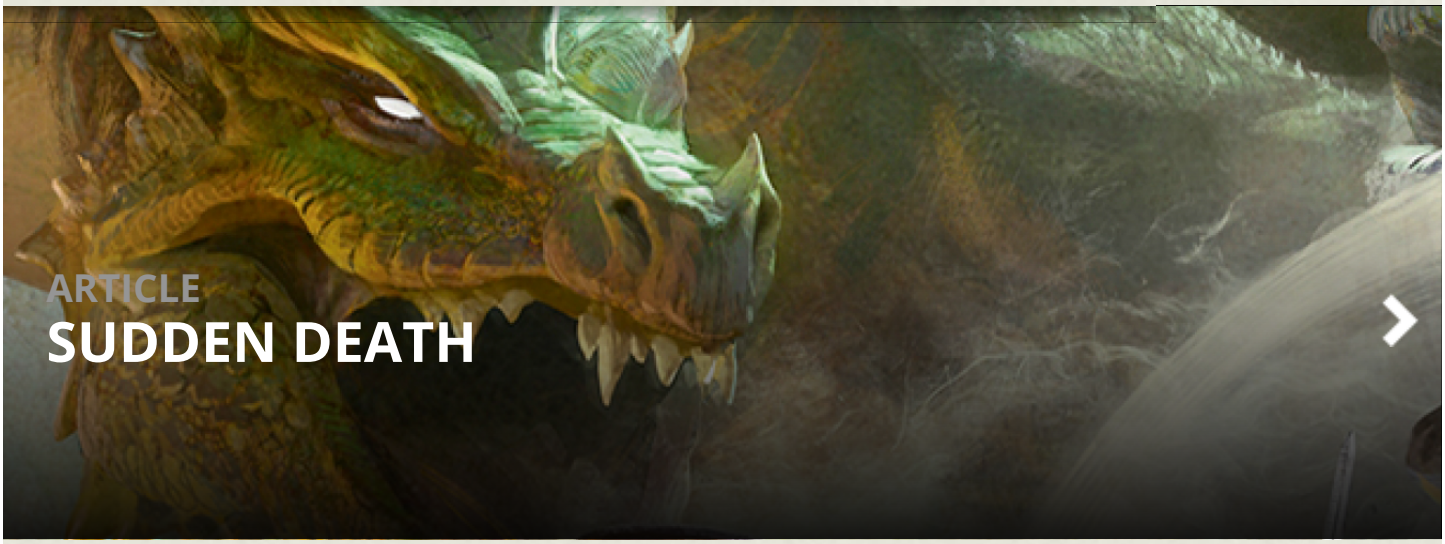
1. You reap what you sow. If you give your PCs the equivalent of a Weapon of Mass Destruction (be it a catastrophic dragon egg, a *wish* spell, an *iron flask* containing a trapped god, or whatever), they will probably use it . . . and rarely how or when you expect them to.

2. Players like to play **D&D** on "Easy Mode" once in a while. (Thank you, Matt Sernett, for this analogy.) I don't get annoyed when my PCs outsmart an adventure . . . whether it's a published adventure or something I've whipped up on my own. It's like that classic confrontation in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when Indiana Jones circumvents what might have been an awesome swordfight with one shot of his pistol. Very entertaining, if unexpected! Just be ready to plow onward. Worst-case scenario: the players spend the rest of the game session patting themselves on the back and sorting out the loot.

3. You can never have too many explosions. (Thank you, Rich Baker, for that observation.) If I can rig something to explode without making the players think I've gone insane, I will. If I can swing it so that the PCs are the ones setting off explosions, so much the better!

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins



ARTICLE

SUDDEN DEATH

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The heroes' ship is destroyed in an explosion and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. Its tiefling captain, Deimos (played by Chris Youngs), cuts a deal with Dispater, an archduke of the Nine Hells, to raise the party's ship from the ocean's depths. The cost? His immortal soul. A contract is drafted, and in exchange, Deimos must also take a succubus concubine named Tyranny.

Dispater releases the soul of Samantia Carnago, a powerful archmage trapped in the Nine Hells. Samantia not only raises the *Morrow* but also transforms it into an infernal warship with a flag made of fire and sails made of smoke. The revamped ship is dubbed the *Sorrow*. The rest of the party isn't altogether comfortable with this latest development, but they go along for the ride. When the gnome bard, Xanthum (played by Curt Gould), winds up trapped in the Nine Hells later on, he uses his time there to hatch a plot not only to free himself but also to free Deimos from his infernal pact. Using information and secrets he gained from a dead pit fiend named Kosh (played by Chris Champagne), Xanthum climbs the infernal ladder, gains the title of duke, rejoins the party, and tries to kill Tyranny aboard the *Sorrow*. This interference breaks one of the conditions of Dispater's contractthat no agent of the Nine Hells will threaten the *Sorrow* or its crew as long as Deimos draws breath. Deimos's soul is saved, but Xanthum is cast out of the party for his hellish affiliations. Fortunately, one of the items he leaves behind is an *hourglass talisman*a magical pendant that allows one to briefly travel back in time.

A common enemy forces a temporary alliance between the heroes and a group of agents of Vecna, led by a lich named Osterneth who also happens to be Vecna's ex-wife. Within Osterneth's rib cage floats a black, shriveled heart, and when the alliance goes south, Deimos's succubus concubine stabs Osterneth in the heart with a dagger. Osterneth kills the succubus, and the party's warforged, Fleet (played by Nacime Khemis), knocks Osterneth off the ship before she can cause any further harm. Later, the heroes learn that is Osterneth is actually a phylactery of sorts, and that the black heart trapped in her rib cage belongs to Vecna, not to her. By piercing it, Tyranny imbued that dagger with the power to not only inflict terrible damage to the god of undeath but to prevent him from reforming when slain in the natural world.

Months later, after destroying two Vecnite sanctuaries and killing one of Vecna's exarchs, the heroes incur the Whispered One's wrath. Vecna launches a full-scale attack on the party's ship and their secret base on the island of Irindolwhere the campaign began. After defending their ship, the heroes retreat to their base, only to find it overrun. Moreover, the Vecnites are in the midst of building a necroforge on the party's turf. This monstrous device captures spirits of the dead and implants them in the bodies of newly built warforged constructs under Vecna's command. As the party launches an assault on their own base, Vecna appears to put them in their place (as it were). The battle takes a promising turn when Vargas (played by Rodney Thompson) stabs Vecna with Tyranny's dagger, dealing damage equal to the god's bloodied value (790 hit points!) and trapping him in mortal form. Now, at last, the god of undeath can be killeda task easier said than done.

Vecna's priests are quick to heal their ailing god, and though the characters put up a great fight, they find themselves running out of resources and hit points, with more of Vecna's allies on the way. Divin, the party's cleric (also played by Curt Gould), receives some unexpected help from his god, Melora, who sends her colossal sharktopus exarch to take a bite out of the party's coastal stronghold, devouring nearly a dozen of Vecna's 30th-level warforged troops. Divin is also saved from certain death by an exarch of Ioun, who takes the form of a tiny fish encased in the glass eye of an eladrin seer named Starra. The fish gets Divin back on his feet and back in the game, but it's still not enough.

Divin and Vargas are both slain by Vecna's evil warforged defenders. Fleet finds himself in hand-to-hand combat with the one-eyed god himself, but while Vecna is keeping the party's warforged busy, the evil god's underlings are overloading their half-built necroforge and preparing to send out a necrotic shock wave that will kill every living creature on the island. All seems lost.

A warforged scout assassin takes down Deimos, but thanks to his epic destiny, the tiefling sorcerer transforms into a huge spectral dragon and flees to a safe corner of the stronghold. Once there, Deimos pulls out the *hourglass talisman* taken from Xanthum. It's the perfect escape hatch, an ideal if convenient way to undo everything that has transpired. It's the last, best hope of avoiding a sudden end to the campaign. However, Deimos has no intention of pushing the "reset button." Killing Vecna once and for all is simply too tempting. . .

Sometimes the end comes before you expect it. I'm reminded of Monte Cook's Ptolus campaign, which, like mine, featured two different groups playing on two different

nights. In that sweeping campaign, I was the one player fortunate enough to be in both groups. My characters were elf twins named Serai and Sercian, and occasionally they'd playfully switch parties without the other players knowing it. The Monday group was a thoughtful, cautious bunch that triumphed over adversity, and that particular campaign ended in victory. The Wednesday group was more reckless and daring, and that campaign ended in failure, not to mention the brutal deaths of the PCseveryone except Sercian, that is, who fled to the manor of his twin brother and continued to make appearances in the Monday night game. The Wednesday night group died in a fight so unremarkable that I can't even recall who the enemies were certainly no one important to the outcome of the campaign. Even Monte was surprised by the Wednesday night campaign's sudden end, and it was a far less satisfying conclusion than the one I experienced as part of his triumphant Monday night group.

My Iomandra campaign has a few things in common with Monte's Ptolus campaign. I have a cautious Monday night group and a somewhat more reckless Wednesday night group, and the Wednesday bunch recently came to a violent end. However, that's where the similarity ends, for unlike the Wednesday night Ptolus game those many years ago, this conclusion proved extremely satisfying. Why? Because the player characters had given their all against a supreme foe, had the perfect escape, and chose to sacrifice themselves instead to ensure the villain's destruction and the safety of the entire world.

At a certain point in the evening, it dawned on Chris, Nacime, Rodney, and Curt that their characters were losing the climactic battle against Vecna and his followers. And yet, Vecna was trapped in mortal form, and it seemed unlikely that they'd get another chance to rid the world of him once and for all. I could see the grim determination in their eyes . . . the dawning realization of what had to be done.

Rather than use the *hourglass talisman* to alter what has transpired, Chris's character uses it to go back in time just far enough to put all his affairs in order. He notifies the other captains in the party's fleet (yes, at epic level, they have their own fleet of ships) that they must carry on without him. Deimos even contacts his uncle, who raised the orphaned tiefling, and thanks him. He then makes plans with Nevin, a halfling rogue-turned-submarine captain (one of Rodney's "retired" characters) to transport a massive, iron-plated torpedo into the party's stronghold on Irindol using a teleportation circle. The bomb, built by dwarf artificers and "liberated" by the party during a previous adventure, has the power to obliterate the stronghold and everyone in it. Nevin's been hauling the damned thing around for the entire epic tier .

. . and now, at long last, the final chess piece is about to be moved into play.

To borrow a quote from *Aliens*: "Nuke them from orbit. It's the only way to be sure."

After Deimos says his goodbyes and makes final preparations, the *hourglass talisman* "flings" him back into the battle with Vecna and his forces. The necroforge is on the verge of releasing its terrible shock wave when Nevin's giant bomb materializes atop the stronghold's teleportation circle, right on schedule, ticking madly down to its final second. Deimos and Fleet are obliterated along with their fallen companions, Vecna, the necroforge, and a sizable corner of the island.

I could see wicked gleams of satisfaction and enthusiasm in the players' eyes as their characters went up in smoke. The last thing Fleet saw before his warforged body was torn asunder was the shock and horror burning in Vecna's soulless eye before the dark god was consumed utterly in the blast. And thus the Wednesday night Iomandra campaign ended, not with a whimper but a bang. Last week I spoke of explosions and what they bring to my campaign. Well, sometimes they bring my campaign to an end.

LESSONS LEARNED

Last week, after the destruction of the Wednesday night party, I saw the new James Bond movie, *Skyfall*, which has a splendidly poignant and satisfying denouement that makes you think they could end the whole series right then and there, and it would be a fitting capstone on James Bond's 50-year legacy in film. I felt much the same way at the end of last Wednesday's game session. Later, upon reflection, this feeling of satisfaction was mixed with relief. Had things unfolded differently and the party survived, I'm not sure I could've planned a more suspenseful final encounter to end the campaign. I mean, how do you top a showdown with Vecna, where the consequence of failure is the end of all life on the party's home island?

My players take comfort in the knowledge that Vecna's destruction will have far-reaching consequences for the world of Iomandra, including the dissolution of the Black Curtaina barrier of necromantic mist that has been slowly engulfing the islands of the Dragovar Empire while concealing the secret kingdom of Vhalt beyond. Ever since his name was first whispered in the heart of the heroic tier, Vecna has loomed like a shadow over the entire campaign. He is undeniably the single greatest threat to the world, and my players know that you can't destroy a god and walk away unscathed. As Rodney Thompson told me afterward, it's the first time he's ever been in a campaign in which the characters triumphed by blowing themselves up.

What's especially fascinating to me is that the decision to throw Vecna at the party was a spontaneous one; it just so happened that the second-to-last game session was on Halloween night, and I wanted to scare the crap out of my players. I couldn't think of a better way than to have the god of undeath show up and wag his bony finger at the party for thwarting his evil plans time and again. Little did I know that I was setting the stage for the campaign's end the following week. But then, you can't have a memorable campaign without taking risks. Sometimes those risks pay off, and sometimes not. A DM can't always predict what the player characters will do from one moment to the next, and that alone makes every risk worth taking.

I would be lying if I said the conclusion was perfect. As it happens, one of my players (Andrew Finch) was regrettably absent for the last session, and his character has an incomplete story arc. Ravok, the goliath battlemind, was dead set on returning to his tribe before the business with Vecna got in the way. (To his credit, Andrew took the news of the campaign's sudden end very well.) There are also a few other dangling plot threads that weren't tied off properly. For these and other reasons, I am thinking about doing something I've never done before: running a campaign "epilogue." It wouldn't be a normal game session by any stretchmore of an excuse to bring the players together one last time, gobble up some pizza, tidy up a few odds and ends, and answer their lingering questions about the campaign. The trick is how to pull it off.

As it happens, one of the deceased characters is a champion of the Raven Queen, a driving force throughout the campaign. The god of death (as opposed to the recently slain god of *undeath*) has appeared on occasion to guide Rodney's character, Vargas, toward his ultimate destinythe destruction of Vecna and his necromantic warforged. My plan is to have the Raven Queen gather the souls of the slain party members before allowing them to "pass on." They'll watch as she toys with Vecna's mortal soul before destroying it utterly, and hopefully that sweet moment will provide the characters with the same sense of closure that their players received the week before. Moreover, the Raven Queen might allow a certain character to complete one piece of unfinished business before reclaiming his soul. At least that way, every player gets to experience a fitting end to the campaign.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

ALL AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Hahrzan, an evil dragonborn wizard, was holed up in a heavily defended military stronghold located in the heart of Io'calioth, the capital city of the Dragovar Empire. The player characters used a True Portal ritual to teleport directly into his secret cloning lab, where they set off a *glyph of warding* that brings the fortress defenders down upon them in droves. As if the guards weren't bad enough, they also faced a black dragon that could phase through solid walls, not to mention the aforementioned dragonborn wizard. In the course of the battle, several canisters of poisonous gas were shattered, filling the lab with deadly fumes.

What made this particular session stand out were the daring heroics of the adventurers. Every character got to do something cool. Never mind the plot! These are just fun stories to tell:

Bartho, the human fighter (played by Matt Sernett): He trapped the dragonborn wizard on a spiral staircase, preventing his escape. He also absorbed a crap-load of damage while drawing multiple attacks from every hostile in the room, and yet somehow he survived.

Alex, the human wizard (played by Jeremy Crawford): Alex spent much of the battle teleporting into and out of sealed cloning tanks to reduce the amount of poison damage he took from the lingering gas. He also polymorphed several bad guys into rabbits and dominated one of the dragonborn guards, ordering him to remove his

gas mask and hand it to the party's gasping rogue, Oleander.

Oleander, the halfling rogue (played by Peter Schaefer): Hopping invisibly around the battlefield, Oleander used a power that tricked the dragon into accidentally attacking the dragonborn wizard. The dragon rolled a critical hit and, much to its chagrin, bit the bloodied wizard's head off. This caused the wizard's life force to transfer into one of his clones, which I'll get to in just a moment.

Varghuum, the dwarf paladin (played by Stan!): His Sturdiness was thankfully immune to the poison gas, but not to the wizard's spells and domination power. While dominated, Varghuum nearly decapitated one of his companions, but later redeemed himself by scoring a crit against the black dragon, cleaving it in two.

Triage, the warforged artificer (played by Nick DiPetrillo): Triage created a simulacrum of himself using a new power. This clever trick enabled him to benefit from his own buffs, which is something he'd never been able to do before. He also spirited himself and Varghuum away to an astral demiplane of his own design, where they could recuperate for a round before rejoining the battle.

At various times throughout the evening, three of the five characters were dropped to negative hit points, but no death saves were rolled because their steadfast comrades got them back on their feet in no time. The session ended on a fun yet dark note, with the characters trapping the dragonborn wizard's last surviving clone inside a cloning tank and watching him slowly suffocate to death.

Every time I sit down to write an installment of this column, I try to offer something of substance, whether it's concrete advice or some kind of useful "takeaway." However, this week I find myself waxing philosophical. I think you'll find something in here worth contemplating, but the article falls short of offering anything concrete. Hopefully it will spark some discussion and debate.

Like many folks at Wizards, I occasionally do press interviews at conventions, and every year someone invariably asks me how **D&D** specifically the tabletop RPG has managed to survive despite ever-growing competition in the digital universe. I usually get asked this question at conventions ruled by digital games (such as PAX), where our more traditional and beloved tabletop RPGs are viewed as sideshow attractions. So, how *has* the game managed to survive for 40 years despite the expanding range of entertainment options?

I believe tabletop **D&D**'s longevity can be attributed to a primal need born in the dawn of human civilization: *the need to tell stories around a campfire*. As a social activity, it's one of the earliest forms of group entertainment. Humans have been doing it for so long that it's part of our social evolution. There are very few modern-day experiences that serve this primal need. You can't get it reading J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (or listening to the audiobook or watching the movie), and you can't get it playing *World of Warcraft* or *Assassin's Creed*. To serve this primal need, the experience requires moment-to-moment, back-and-forth interaction between the storyteller and a captive audience. Alas, we can't conjure J.R.R. Tolkien to appear across the campfire and tell us everything he knows about hobbits. The designers of *World of Warcraft* and *Assassin's Creed* can't see you react to the worlds they've

created, nor can they adapt their work to serve your personal needs of wish fulfillment. Conversely, a **D&D** campaign is created in the moment. It's not recited or recorded or immutable. Even a published **D&D** campaign setting such as the **Forgotten Realms** or the **World of Greyhawk** isn't meant to be run exactly as written (and, as far as I know, never has been). Campaign settings are books, not campfire stories. Like novels and movies, they merely contain ideas that a clever DM can bring to life as interactive stories around a dining room table among friends who bring their own contributions to the story, be they emotional reactions, commentary, characterizations, plot wrinkles, or what-have-you.

The **D&D** RPG successfully replaced the traditional campfire with a table, but the social experience feels like a campfire experience, and that's why **D&D** continues to hold its own despite the plethora of new entertainment options vying for our attention. As fun as it is to curl up with a favorite novel or play a video game, there's still that human need for the campfire experience that beckons us to gather in small groups and share stories that exist in the moment, if not for all time. Often, for better or worse, these stories remain with us for the rest of our lives.

If you believe what I'm saying is true, then there's nothing weird about being a Dungeon Master. DMs merely do what humans have been doing since the dawn of recorded history: oral storytelling. It's as human a pastime as any other social activity, and certainly one of the most creatively engaging. The sad truth is that a lot of our **D&D** stories exist only in the memories of the players, for they are rarely recorded. Fortunately, this is where the digital universe can help us. Humans in the 21st century have so many different ways to chronicle what happens in their **D&D** games, and if you're a Dungeon Master, you have an important decision to make: You must decide if the stories you plan to tell what amounts to your living campaign is something you wish only your players to experience. Until I started writing this column, that's pretty much how I felt. My 3rd Edition campaign exists, for the most part, in the memories of the dozen or so players who participated in it. There are no blog posts, YouTube videos, or wikis to capture the events of the Arveniar campaign, and there might never be, and that's fine by me. However, you might feel differently about your campaign. How will your great stories be remembered?

LESSONS LEARNED

Since our topic-du-jour is *storytelling*, I'd like to share a few great quotes about the storytelling experience, some of which inspired me to write this article, and some of which reflect my own storytelling style and sensibilities. Each quote reminds me of game sessions that I've run, but in the interests of brevity, I think I'll save those tales

for another campfire. Without further adieu, here they are:

"People have wanted to narrate since first we banged rocks together & wondered about fire. There'll be tellings as long as there are any of us here, until the stars disappear one by one like turned-out lights."

China Miéville
(author of *Perdido Street Station*)

"Stories have to be told, or they die, and when they die we can't remember who we are or why we're here."

Sue Monk Kidd
(author of *The Secret Life of Bees*)

"All great literature is one of two stories; a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town."

Leo Tolstoy
(novelist and essayist)

"I have stolen ideas from every book I've ever read."

Philip Pullman
(author of the *His Dark Materials* novel trilogy)

"When someone is mean to me, I just make them the victim in my next book."

Mary Higgins Clark
(suspense novelist)

"There's a great tradition in storytelling that's thousands of years old, telling stories about kings and their palaces, and that's really what I wanted to do."

Aaron Sorkin
(American screenwriter and playwright)

"Human stories are practically always about one thing, really, aren't they? Death. The inevitability of death . . ."

J.R.R. Tolkien

"The world is shaped by two things stories told and the memories they leave behind."

Vera Nazarian
(fantasy and science fiction writer)

"Whatever story you're telling, it will be more interesting if, at the end you add, 'and then everything burst into flames.' "

Brian P. Cleary
(humorist and grammarian)

Next week, I'll climb into the skin of a **D&D** player and tell you what I think of some of my past Dungeon Masters. The good ones have one important trait in common, and I bet you'll never guess what it is.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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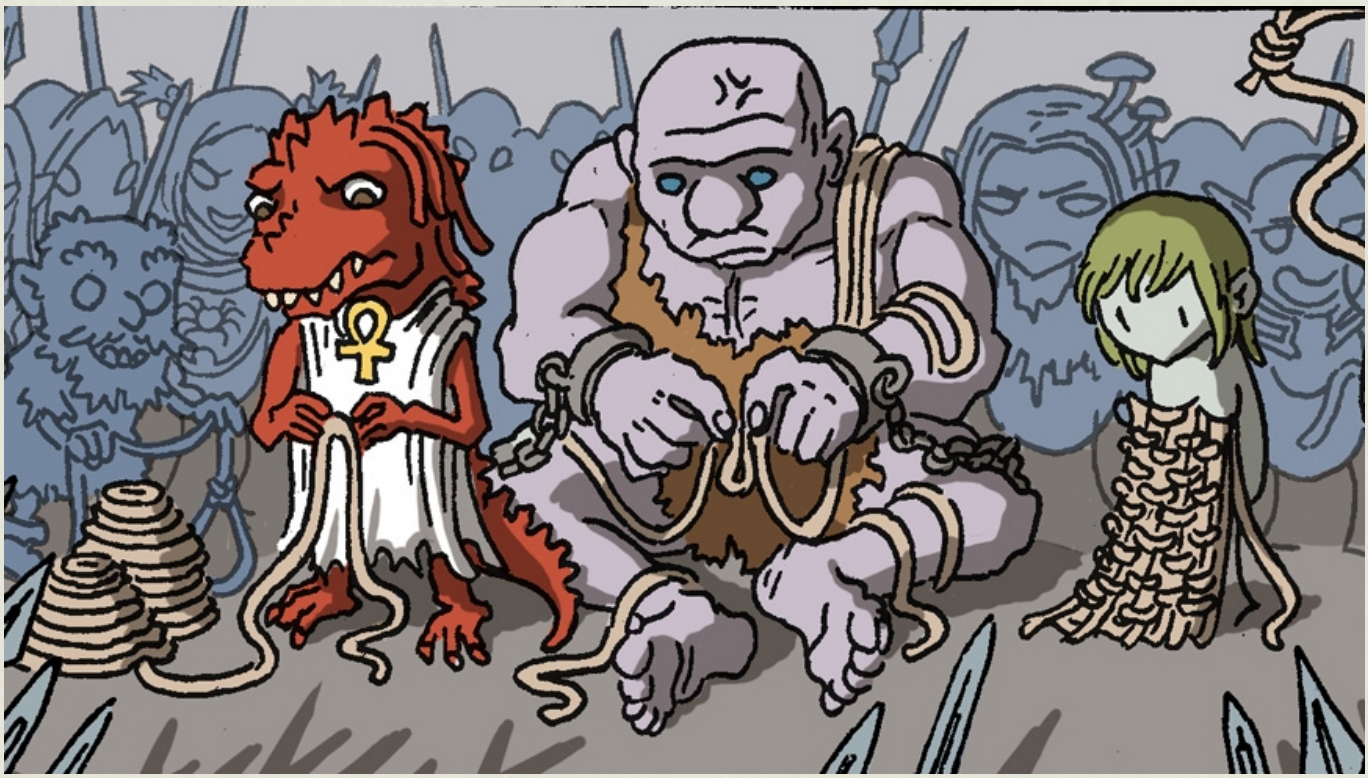
FEATURED ARTICLE



OUT OF THE ABYSS WALKTHROUGH POSTER

ARTICLE

LEGO MY EGO

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. As the campaign shifted from paragon to epic tier, one of my players suggested between sessions that I gather input from the players as I put thought toward how to wrap up the campaign. Every player has things he's like to see happen before the end, things they'd like their characters to accomplish, and story threads they'd like to wrap up. I thought that was a great idea and asked each of them to email me their "wish lists." It reminded me that the campaign isn't mine alone. As the screenwriter/director John Milius says in his DVD commentary for *The Wind and the Lion* (the 1975 period epic starring Sean Connery), "It's an adventure . . . and you're all in it together, and there's a wonderful quality to that. It's no more your ego . . . you're just serving the story."

Like most DMs, I enjoy the occasional turn on the players' side of the DM screen. I don't profess to be anything but an average **D&D** player, but it's refreshing to play a character that isn't omnipotent and doesn't know what's behind every corner of the dungeon.

Most of my player experiences are one-off adventures lots of fun, memorable experiences to be sure, but poor substitutes for a lively, ongoing campaign. It's been over a year since I was a player in a campaign, and in the past 35 years, I've probably played in only a half-dozen long-running campaigns. This week, I'd like to tell you about three DMs from my past. Let's call them Nosnra, Grugnur, and Snurre to keep things on the level. For those of you who don't know, these names belong to three

giants immortalized in a trilogy of adventures written by the late, great Gary Gygax. As you'll see, the names are well earned.

DUNGEON MASTER #1: "NOSNRA"

Nosnra liked to play by his own rules and call the shots. He ran the campaign he wanted to run, not the campaign his players wanted to play. He didn't care what was written in the rulebooks, and his campaign was riddled with all sorts of house rules catering to the style of play he preferred. If he didn't like a rule, he'd throw it out, which is of course the DM's prerogative. A wonderful thing about **D&D** is that you can ignore the rules you don't like or that don't suit the style of game you're running. However, Nosnra liked to create new rules or combine rules from different systems more than he liked coming up with adventure ideas. His campaign invariably became an exercise to flex his game designer muscles rather than tell an exciting story. In the absence of a good story, we did a lot of dungeon crawling and monster slaying. I remember a couple sessions during which I dozed off because every encounter was the same tedious battle over and over, albeit with different foes. Invariably, the players' lukewarm reactions would frustrate Nosnra, and that would be it. He'd shake his fists at the game's inadequacies, lose his personal investment in the campaign, call it quits without admitting his own hand in the campaign's downfall, and try to talk us into starting over at first level.

DUNGEON MASTER #2: "GRUGNUR"

Grugnur had his campaign thoroughly mapped out to the absurd extent that nothing the players tried ever took him out of his comfort zone. For him, preparation was the key to victory. On those rare occasions when we tried to venture beyond the invisible fence he'd erected around the campaign, something momentous would occur that lured us back from the fringe toward the heart of Grugnur's domain. We were his prisoners and, at least for a while, didn't even know it. But we caught on eventually, and like prisoners, we'd occasionally rebel. We'd undermine every carefully constructed attempt at suspense. For example, whenever a bad guy appeared on the scene, we'd give him or her a stupid name that would stick for the rest of the session, if not the entire campaign. Grugnur would shake his head and sigh when we dubbed his villain "Lord Melonbrain," and when Lord Melonbrain started ruining the game with every appearance, he would unceremoniously vanish, only to be replaced by "Captain Chamberpot," "Count Donkeyface," or some other walking joke . . . I mean bloke. Grugnur took strides to punish us for defaming his NPCs the "uppance" might come right away, or he might stew for weeks before unleashing his cold-blooded fury upon us.

DUNGEON MASTER #3: "SNURRE"

"Snurre" was the absolute authority on the rules knew every one inside and out. A tad sadistic, he also believed that good drama resulted from a relentless increase in tension, and thus he rarely let the player characters gain the advantage. They were threatened or cajoled into completing quests by NPCs much more powerful than them, they were insulted and put down by peasants and nobles alike, they were poorly equipped (with nary a healing potion to split between them), and every dungeon was a harrowing slog that wouldn't just kill characters but also scar and maim them. In other words, there was no frying pan just the fire. My first character in Snurre's campaign was a wizard, and given that the campaign was a low-magic one, Snurre insisted on choosing my spells and equipment for me. My 1st-level spell list consisted of two choices, *erase* and *ventriloquism*. These are, as you well know, two of the most useless spells in the **AD&D** game . . . particularly when you're fighting an ankheg. I was given no weapons to fight with, only a 50-foot coil of rope. I hit upon the idea of using the rope to lasso and snare the ankheg, but Snurre would have none of that silliness. As soon as he caught wind of my plans, the ankheg burrowed underground and devoured my wizard from below. That'll teach me for trying to outfox the DM!

Nosnra, Grugnur, and Snurre aren't upstarts. All three DMs are seasoned pros with tons of XP under their belts (and the trophy-corpses of many slain adventurers to prove it). However, they all share a common flaw: They let their egos get in the way of the fun.

Ego is like a shield that protects us against embarrassment and other things that

threaten our pride, confidence, and self-esteem. I control my ego by first acknowledging that I have one; everyone does. I like to say that I have no ego, but it would be more accurate to say my ego is kept in check, and I think that makes me a better DM. Letting go of the ego allows one to play the fool and focus on what will make the players happy. It incentivizes one to prepare less and improvise more. Once the ego gets out of the way, it's easy to see that you don't need to be in total control to run a good game.

Nosnra likes to DM because it pleases him, but he's rarely satisfied with the game system enough to give his players the same sense of pleasure. When he can't deal with the campaign he's created, he quickly abandons it. Grugnur is the opposite; his campaign is so cleverly and proudly constructed that it's virtually indestructible, but it doesn't allow players as much free reign as they sometimes crave. Snurre doesn't like it when the players win; in his campaign, the house always wins, and that makes him feel mighty and bolsters his reputation as a Killer DM.

Ego manifests in many different ways. Recognizing this fact is the first step toward dealing with it. Ego's not a monster to be slain; it's more like a beast to be tamed.

LESSONS LEARNED

Being a Dungeon Master means putting yourself out there, on center stage, with only a thin DM screen (and sometimes not even that) separating you from the players, all of whom are counting on you to deliver a memorable gaming experience. In many respects, you're like an actor standing on a stage.

Let's run with the actor analogy for a moment. When I think of actors whom I admire, most of them are razor-sharp, funny people who are looking for more than self-gratification through their art. They also tend to be a bit awkward and uncomfortable in their own skin. The "greats" such as Robert DeNiro, Helen Mirren, Clint Eastwood, and Meryl Streep use ego to spur great performances and drive professional success, but somehow they've figured out how to keep their egos in check. It's no wonder people enjoy working with them; they come across as modest, humble, and self-effacing. While they take their careers seriously, they don't take themselves that seriously. They have the power to laugh at themselves a rare gift, and a surefire way to keep the ego from ruining their careers. It's the ones who can't control their egos who are the Hollywood train wrecks. I don't need to name names. Good entertainers derive the most pleasure from entertaining others, not themselves.

Let me be the first to point out that everyone wrestles with his or her ego, and sometimes ego gets the better of us despite our vigilance. I could be the most self-effacing and humble DM in the world (although I admit that I'm not), but woe to anyone who cuts me off on the freeway or thinks they know more useless Star Trek trivia than I do. You want to see my ego take charge? There are plenty of arenas in which I let my ego go a little wild, but the gaming table isn't one of them. Here's what I do to keep my ego from wreaking havoc with my campaign, which, I imagine, is what a lot of humble actors do when they walk out on stage to face a captive audience:

- **I remember that every session is a fresh start . . . and a chance to take a risk.**

- **I expect to make mistakes (and never fail to disappoint), and I hope to learn from them.**
- **I tell myself I'm on my players' side. The campaign is not about Me vs. Them.**
- **At the end of every session, I look for smiles on the players' faces. If I don't see any, I know something's not right.**

Along with the creative ability to improvise, DMs need self-awareness and the ability to poke fun at themselves. Every DM who reads this article thinks he or she has the ability to do both. Yeah, well, we all have the ability to breathe out of the nose instead of the mouth; doesn't mean we all do it. If you're truly self-aware and willing to laugh at yourself, you don't need a *true seeing* spell to know when your ego is getting in the way and doing more harm than good. It will always be there to protect you, but sometimes you gotta let it go.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

HUMPTY DUMPTY CONUNDRUM

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The heroes are trapped inside a military stronghold in Io'calioth, capital of the Dragovar Empire. A dragonborn villainess named Zarkhrysa is determined to annihilate them for their constant meddling in her plans. The characters know she's part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government, but how exactly remains a mystery.

There you have it: one plot, one NPC, and one secret. If this represented the entirety of my campaign, my job as the DM would be relatively easy. Alas, that's not the case. Over the past five years, I've littered the campaign with a plethora of plots, myriad NPCs with dreams and desires, and scores of secrets scattered everywhere in little fragments. All the king's horses and all the king's men, indeed!

Every time I run an adventure for my Monday and Wednesday night group, I'm adding complexity to the campaign new plot details to sort through, new NPCs to throw in the party's path, and new revelations to uncover. The longer a campaign runs, the more pieces there are to pick up and put together into something . . . whole. I could make the campaign shorter, include fewer NPCs, and reduce the number of fiendish plots, but then the campaign world wouldn't feel as big, and the players might one day find themselves out of things to do. It's a conundrum.

The three biggest contributors to campaign complexity are **plots**, **NPCs**, and **secrets**. Every new plot that brews, every new NPC who shows up with an agenda, and every

secret I plant in the world has the potential to sweep the player characters away on an adventure that lasts for hours, days, weeks, or months. The Iomandra campaign has scores of plots, hundreds of important NPCs, and too many secrets to count. The adventurers are not only dealing with the quest-of-the-day but also dealing with the consequences of leaving other quests unfinished, and here I am, the not-so-blameless DM, trying to make the most of it.

The only things that keep me sane are my notes. As I've mentioned before, I go into every game session with a one-page printout that summarizes key beats from previous sessions, lists the names of NPCs likely to be of importance, and spells out what I *think* might happen over the course of the session. Throughout the game, I'm scribbling notes on this page the name of an NPC who makes an unexpected appearance, names of things I'm forced to create on the fly, reminders to myself, strange things that happen during an encounter that might have bearing on future events, and the occasional funny quote. Once in a while, a character will do something crazy but memorable; I'll jot that down, too. At the end of the session, the page goes in the back of my campaign binder, which has, over the past five years, become a chronicle of the party's shenanigans (albeit an unpublishable one).

Here's an sample page from my campaign binder:

Life of the Party

Plots. NPCs. Secrets. These are the things I'm most interested in keeping track of. Why? Because in order to pull the campaign together and turn it into something more than just a string of adventures, I need to keep bringing old plots, NPCs, and secrets back into play and finding ways to pay them off. If I can't remember them, then I'm just littering the campaign with bits of debris plots that are never thwarted, NPCs without destinies or arcs, and secrets lost forever. That's not the campaign I'm trying to build.

I don't need horses or men to gather up the bits of my campaign and start piecing things together. My campaign binder contains everything I need to assemble my campaign: one-sheets from every single game session, in chronological order. Some barely have a mark on them; others are covered with notes, scrawls, and half-baked thoughts that don't really amount to much but serve to jog my memory of events from Way Back When. When I'm worried that my campaign might be falling apart, I open my campaign binder and start leafing through past episodes, sometimes going all the way back to the beginning. Look! Here's a quest the characters abandoned . . . what are the consequences of their negligence? Here's an NPC with some unfinished business . . . I wonder if there's a way to bring her back into the story? And behold, here's a little secret the players never figured out . . . maybe it's time they learned the truth!

PLOTS, NPCS, AND SECRETS

A couple sessions ago, the characters knocked off a major campaign villain and the last of his surviving clones. It was the kind of fate you wish upon super-villains in James Bond movies: violent with a dab of poetic justice. (The last clone was made to suffocate to death in his own cloning tank while the heroes watched.) I was

concerned because I didn't know quite where to take the campaign from there . . . or how to make the next few game sessions just as thrilling. After all, once the campaign hits a dizzying high, the natural tendency is to go down from there. It takes a lot of thought and effort or pure delirium to keep going up. I had a few ideas (odds and ends rattling about in my brain), but I needed to go back to my campaign binder to find inspiration . . . or, more precisely, to find things that would resonate with my players. As it happens, I found several.

Here are some pieces I have to work with:

1. When last we left the PCs, they were nearly out of resources. Our sly villainess, Zarkhrysa, allowed them 10 minutes to craft a teleportation circle, but with no intention of letting them escape. She and her wizards have been secretly scrying on the party and casting a ritual to disrupt their circle once activated. It seemed like a surefire way to get rid of the whole party at once, once and for all.
2. The players suspected something was amiss when Zarkhrysa held her forces back instead of steamrolling over them. Only one of the characters (a warforged artificer named Triage, played by Nick DiPetrillo) actually ended up using the teleportation circle, and now he's separated from the rest of the group. The party's attempt to reach him via *sending stone* didn't work, suggesting that he might be dead. (Triage's sending stone is embedded in his brain, making it unlikely that the item was simply lost.)

3. Speaking of missing party members, when Michele Carter moved to Baltimore, her character (an eladrin warlord named Andraste) left the party to become an NPC. The last time the PCs spoke with her, she was trying to get Alethia, her aunt, out of prison. Aunt Alethia is a member of the Knights of Ardyn, a good-aligned terrorist group dedicated to destroying corrupt elements within the Dragovar Empire. The party thinks she's being held in Zardkarath, an underground Dragovar prison on the island of Mheletros (ruled by an adamantine dragon overlord).
4. Speaking of the Dragovar Empire, it's been without an emperor since the start of the campaign (hence the never-ending upheaval). The party's human wizard, Alex (played by Jeremy Crawford), recently captured a purple dragon because he needed her heart as a ritual component. In a bid to save her own life, the dragon informed Alex that the emperor was alive but refused to divulge his location.

5. Zarkhrysa was a high-ranking member of the martial caste, which, in the absence of an emperor, has imposed martial law throughout the empire. Recently ousted from the Vost Miraj (the imperial spy agency) after a botched operation, she now wants to install a dragonborn noble on the imperial throne who shares her political ideology. However, no noble can claim the throne without the approval of the Council of Viziers, all members of the divine caste who are painfully fastidious when it comes to scrutinizing a candidate's royal bloodline. However, with the aid of a dragonborn archmage named Hahrzan, Zarkhrysa recently imbued a secret squad of dragonborn assassins with doppelganger-like shapechanging abilities. She plans to command this squad to assassinate the viziers, lay the blame on her replacement in the Vost Miraj, and use the resulting anarchy to push the Dragovar nobility into acting quickly to restore order with a new emperor on the throne.
6. Zarkhrysa's choice for emperor is a terrifyingly evil member of the noble caste, a Tiamat-worshiping dragonborn named Menes Narakhty. Shielded by his equally vile mother, he seeks an alliance through marriage with the popular and influential House Irizaxes. Menes plans to marry Lord Irizaxes's eldest daughter, Taishan. She's the opposite of Menes caring, giving, and passionate about her faith in Bahamut. It's a disaster waiting to happen.
7. Amid my campaign notes is an idea that never actually got used: a dragonborn masquerade. As a prelude to the wedding of Menes Narakhty and Taishan Irizaxes, I thought it might be fun to have the heroes crash the masquerade. Unfortunately, the PCs were always too distracted with other things to get involved in the political machinations of the Dragovar nobility, and so the masquerade idea fell by the wayside.
8. At present, Peter Schaefer and Stan! both have secondary characters who were written out of the campaign at different times in the past year. You could say that both succumbed to "misadventure." As noted in my campaign binder, Metis (Peter's morose changeling warlock) was knocked unconscious and taken prisoner by Vost Miraj agents several months ago, and the players quickly gave up on trying to rescue him. (At the time he went missing, he'd managed to place his companions in great peril and wasn't very well liked.) Stan!'s previous character, Baharoosh (a dragonborn assassin) was a member of the Vost Miraj sent to spy on the party. The party never trusted him (not surprisingly), even

though he sided with them against the Vost Miraj multiple times. When Zarkhrysa realized he'd gone rogue, she separated Baharoosh from the other PCs and promptly made him disappear. The other characters, unaware of the risks he'd taken to help them, weren't sad to see him go.

And here's how all the pieces are coming together:

Shapechanging dragonborn assassins: The idea began to germinate in my brain when Metis, Peter's changeling warlock, was captured by the Vost Miraj. I made a note to myself: *The Vost Miraj turns Metis over to Hahrzan for experimentation.* By experimenting on the changeling, Hahrzan learned how to imbue Zarkhrysa's dragonborn assassins with doppelganger-like traits. Now we have the "doppelborn," whose Vost Miraj training enables them to infiltrate the divine caste, worm their way into the Tower of Law, and assassinate the Council of Viziers. The fact that they believe they're working for the Vost Miraj exonerates Zarkhrysa, who no longer leads the organization. The blame falls squarely on her oblivious replacement, who will surely be branded a traitor and a fool.

The conspiracy to overthrow the government: I decided to keep the changeling alive and imprisoned in Hahrzan's cloning lab. Last week, while scrambling to escape the villain's stronghold, Peter's new character, Oleander, found his previous character, Metis, trapped inside a cloning vat and unable to change his form. But here's the fun part: as a doppelganger, Metis is really good at reading minds and reading lips. He knows a secret, which Peter is told by me in confidence: Zarkhrysa is planning to assassinate the Council of Viziers to expedite the coronation of a new emperor, while simultaneously placing her best candidate front and center. Moreover, as a prelude to the marriage of House Irizaxes and House Narakhty, a dragonborn masquerade is set to take place concurrent with the assassinations. Everyone in attendance, including Zarkhrysa and Menes Narakhty, will have an ironclad alibi. Metis also knows that the masquerade is taking place aboard a ship, and the only way to reach it is via teleportation circle. Zarkhrysa carries an invitation with the circle's arcane address printed on it.

The Dragovar Empire's missing emperor: Having just killed the last of Hahrzan's clones, Jeremy hit upon the idea of using Hahrzan's research to create a clone of the imprisoned purple dragon. If he's successful, he'll get the heart he needs for his ritual from the purple dragon's clone, and the real purple dragon can be set free. Were this to happen, the characters might suddenly learn the whereabouts of Emperor Azunkhan IX. I won't divulge that secret here, for the sake of keeping the Monday night group in suspense, but as a point of fact, it is the single oldest unresolved secret in the entire campaign. The question then becomes: what happens if the characters return the real emperor to the throne before Zarkhrysa can install Menes Narakhty in his place? There we have the makings of a campaign-ender, don't you think?

The other missing party members: Poor Triage. Zapped into oblivion by a sabotaged teleportation circle! What the heck do I do with him? Is there some way I can connect his latest misfortune to some other unresolved piece of the campaign? Why yes, there is: The prison of Zardkarath. Interestingly, the location has never been explored but has come up many times in the campaign (the name first appears on

page 5 in my campaign binder, which must be at least 500 pages thick). It occurred to me that the Vost Miraj would probably have a secret level of the prison where they keep captives who are too important to kill and too dangerous to mingle with the "rank and file." No doubt the level would be scry-proof and sending-proof, its cells teleportation-proof. If you want to dispose of an epic-level party without the risk of them being brought back from the dead, there's no better place than prison, particularly if they show up *sans* gear. (Naturally their precious stuff would be teleported elsewhere. Thank you, *Tomb of Horrors*, for teaching me that old trick!) The only good news is that Triage is not alone he has Stan!'s former character, Baharoosh, to keep him company. Two characters who never really liked each other . . . reunited at last! Surely it doesn't get any sweeter than that.

Au contraire.

LESSONS LEARNED

Obviously, I can't have Triage locked up in an escape-proof penitentiary for the rest of the campaign. As a player, poor Nick would be bored to tears! (And based on the party's track record, there's a 97.1 percent chance that Triage's companions wouldn't bother mounting a rescue.) However, it stands to reason that the Vost Miraj would keep other important prisoners there as well, including Andraste's aunt, Alethia. It doesn't take a genius to imagine what might happen next.

By scouring my campaign notes and piecing together various unresolved fragments, I've stumbled upon a way to put Humpty Dumpty back together again by having Andraste and the Knights of Ardyn infiltrate Zardkarath and attack the Vost Miraj-controlled prison level in a desperate attempt to free Alethia from captivity. What better way to liberate Triage and Baharoosh as well? Since neither Triage nor Baharoosh are in any condition to "duke it out" with the prison's ardent defenders, I imagine it playing out more as a roleplaying opportunity than a combat encounter. Coincidentally, Andraste never liked Triage or Baharoosh because she always doubted their motives; it's a laughable bit of irony to have her show up and accidentally rescue them.

In the end, managing a **D&D** campaign is about knowing what you have to play with and fitting the pieces together as best you can. That's where the campaign binder (or whatever device you need to capture your notes) comes in. If you can't see all the pieces, you can't put the campaign back together again.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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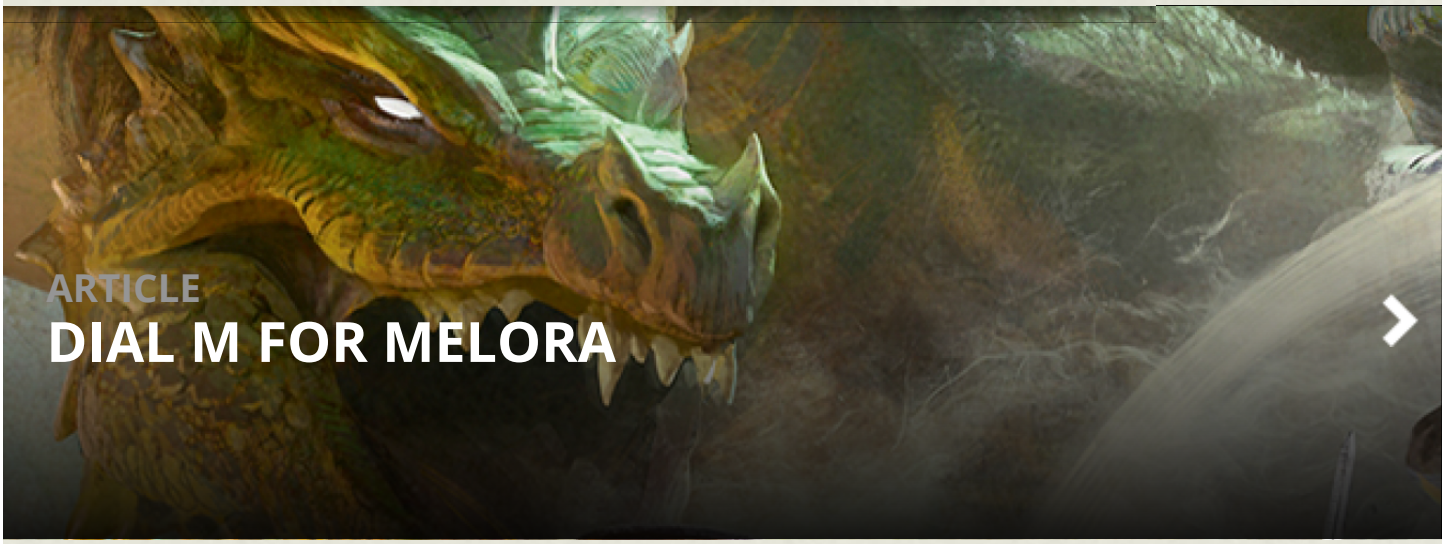
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

DIAL M FOR MELORA

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. In his youth, Alex von Hyden (played by Jeremy Crawford) was one of several children subjected to a magical experiment. An arcane sect of the Dragovar Empire called the Shan Qabal trapped the spirits of ancient dragons inside these children, with the goal of raising and training them as elite imperial assassins. However, a change in the political landscape forced the sect to abandon the project and terminate its subjects. Alex and a handful of other children were spirited away, and the Shan Qabal spent years hunting them down. This led to the first major conflict of the campaign as a Shan Qabal operative named Serusa arrived on the island of Kheth and discovered Alex, now a young wizard of formidable power, in the company of several friends who would eventually become his adventuring companions. Although she was ultimately thwarted, Serusa managed to wreak all sorts of havoc throughout the heroic tier before her eventualand well-deserveddemise.

Throughout paragon tier, the Shan Qabal resurfaced occasionally to deal with Alex and his companions. Serusa was replaced by her master and mentor, Hahrzan, who proved a difficult adversary to eliminate because of his clones. Eventually, the heroes fought their way through enough Hahrzans to reach the supreme leader of the Shan Qabal, the venerable Lenkhor Krige, the dragonborn archwizard responsible for binding the spirits of ancient dragons to Alex and the other children. Confined to his deathbed and kept alive by magic, Lenkhor regretted having to terminate the

experiments and finally made peace with Alex, even offering him a seat within the Shan Qabal. Hahrzan would have none of it, of course, and so the Shan Qabal splintered in two.

Now an agent of the Shan Qabal, Alex set out to destroy Hahrzan's splinter sect. However, those plans were derailed when a new threat emerged in the form of the Dragovar Empire's spy agency, the Vost Miraj, charged with defending the empire against "outside threats." Its leader, Zarkhrysa, believed that Alex and his companions were too great a threat to ignore, so she planted an agent in their midst to spy on thema dragonborn rogue named Baharoosh (played by Stan!). Eventually, the heroes made Baharoosh a believer in their cause, and Zarkhrysa realized he was no longer following orders. She summoned Baharoosh to the Vost Miraj headquarters, signed his death warrant in front of him, and ordered him to carry it out. When he refused, she had him disposed of.

Although quite adept at staying alive, Zarkhrysa knew her day of reckoning was fast approaching. The epic-level adventurers were out of control and gunning for her. Her best hope of survival was to forge an alliance with someone as powerful as she . . . someone who had fought the heroes and survived countless times. And thus the alliance between Zarkhrysa and Hahrzan was born.

Tis the season for Christmas movies, from saccharine-sweet classics such as *Miracle on 34th Street* and *It's a Wonderful Life* to the holiday-gone-awry slapstick comedies of *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* and *Home Alone*. Me, I'm more of *A Nightmare Before Christmas* guy. However, my all-time favorite Christmas movie is *Die Hard*. The movie's premise is simple: a police officer travels to Los Angeles to be with his family at Christmas and ends up trapped in a high-rise with a gang of terrorists. Part of what makes the movie work is the oh-so-perfect combination of the action-adventure storyline set against a holiday backdrop. But the thing that makes the movie's narrative superlative is the ever-shifting balance of power between our "everyman" protagonist, John McClane (played by Bruce Willis), and his ruthless Scrooge-like antagonist, Hans Gruber (played by Alan Rickman).

In any narrative, the most interesting and memorable conflicts occur when the balance of power shifts back and forth between protagonist and antagonist. This "dance" is what keeps the audience on edge. If the protagonist always has the advantage, then the villain never feels like a genuine threat. Conversely, if the protagonist never gains the advantage, any victory he achieves at the end of the film doesn't feel earned. It feels more like a cheat.

Here's how the dance of power plays out in *Die Hard*:

> *Terrorists seize control of a high-rise during a corporate Christmas party, trapping our hero inside and taking his wife hostage.* (Advantage: Antagonist)
>
> *Our hero uses the element of surprise to knock off terrorists one by one.* (Advantage: Protagonist)
>
> *The terrorists catch on and begin scouring the building for our hero, who's forced to hide.* (Advantage: Antagonist)

Hopelessly outnumbered, our hero clamors to the rooftop and contacts the police using a terrorist's walkie-talkie. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The terrorists trick the police into thinking the hero's call was a hoax. (Advantage: Antagonist)

Our hero throws a terrorist's corpse out of a window and onto a police car, providing irrefutable evidence that something's amiss. Within minutes, cops are everywhere. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The terrorists begin executing hostages and threaten to kill more of them unless our hero surrenders himself. (Advantage: Antagonist)

A chance encounter places the main villain temporarily at our hero's mercy. (Advantage: Protagonist)

The main villain escapes and uses superior firepower to force the hero's retreat, during which our hero is wounded while running barefoot across a floor covered with broken glass. (Advantage: Antagonist)

And so it goes, from the beginning of the movie to the end. One can dissect a lot of stories and find, at their very heart, this seesaw dynamic. The hero gains ground then loses ground; every setback is followed by a victory. You see the same thing in pro wrestling rivalries. Say what you want about Vince McMahon, but he and other ringmasters like him propelled professional wrestling into the stratosphere because they understood what makes great drama. When you analyze the greatest pro wrestling matches in history, one constant is the back-and-forth shift in advantage between competing wrestlers, rather like a dance. It's readily apparent, even formulaic, but absolutely necessary for creating real conflict.

Unfortunately, this wonderful seesaw dynamic is very hard to accomplish in a **D&D** campaign, where the outcome of any direct confrontation is resolved through random die rolls, and let's face it: most players will go to extremes to make sure the villains never get the chance to turn the tables or seize the advantage. They're not looking to dance or play your narrative reindeer games; they want to win.

LESSONS LEARNED

The first time the hero and villain meet face-to-face in *Die Hard*, the hero has the advantage. He has a gun; the villain does not. The villain tries to buy time until he can escape, which he does. The second time they meet, the balance of power is reversed. The villain has the advantage, not to mention the hero's wife at gunpoint, and it seems like only a Christmas miracle will save the day.

As a DM, I don't have that level of control over my campaign. Were I to place one of my major villains at the characters' mercy, I have little doubt that the villain would be taken out. And though I could probably contrive some means to facilitate the villain's escape, my players would think I was going to excessive lengths to steer the campaignand they'd be right. It's a big turn-off.

After running campaigns for many different groups, I've come to the conclusion that I

can't let my appreciation for the back-and-forth power shift between good guys and bad guys affect my DMing style. If it happens, it happens. Sometimes die rolls can work in my favor, allowing a beloved villain to gain the upper hand or perpetrate a daring escape. I savor those moments, but I don't plan for them. Better to let the dice fall where they may.

That said, there have been a few nice power shifts in the Monday night campaign of late, mostly due to the fact that the heroes are fighting villainous organizations as well as individuals. The good thing about using villainous organizations such as the Shan Qabal and the Vost Miraj is that they can survive the loss of particular members, and it takes more than a few lucky dice rolls to dispose of them once and for all. If you're like me and you crave that ever-shifting balance of power, I recommend spending more time fleshing out your villainous organizations than worrying about any one particular member. Apart from being durable and resourceful, an evil organization can itself become a character in your ongoing campaign, and a rewardingly multifaceted one made up of members who don't always see eye to eye and sometimes work at cross-purposes. Evil organizations can be sabotaged, undermined, and infiltrated. They can be turned against themselves and transformed. They can be defeated, only to return with a vengeance.

Well, that's all I got for 2012. Y'all have a great holiday. As for me, I'll be watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for the umpteenth time and trying to track down my DVD copy of *Die Hard*, which I think I might have loaned to someone I can't remember who. Speaking of *Die Hard*, this particular installment of The Dungeon Master Experience was written while listening to Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, portions of which feature prominently in the film's musical score. (Like I need another reason to love that movie.)

No column next week, as Wizards of the Coast is closed for the holiday break, but I'll be back in January with some advice on playing gods and divine intervention, not just from me but also from the Grandfather of Roleplaying Games himself, Gary Gygax.

Until the next encounter!

ARTICLE

UNFLAPPABLE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. It's one of those nights when the party's on the ropes. Two players are absent, leaving the group without its fighter and shaman. The wizard just dropped to ""9 hit points while trying to fill the "tank" role, the paladin takes 151 points of damage from back-to-back critical hits and has 1 hit point remaining, the ranger is fighting a huge blue dragon by himself, the artificer is imprisoned thousands of miles away, and the rogue can't decide if it's in his best interest to remain invisible or risk discovery by stopping the main villain before she escapes amid the chaos.

My players do the clever thing: they slow things down, take their time, and look toward the clock. It's 9:15 PM. We typically play until 9:30 or 10:00, but their body language tells me they're ready to call it a night, not because they want the session to end but because they know time will freeze just long enough for the fighter and shaman (and maybe even the artificer) to miraculously reappear next week with their triple-digit hit points and unspent encounter powers. Is that cheating? Don't care. Like I said, they're a clever bunch.

A couple years ago, at one of the big conventions, someone asked me what's the best piece of DM advice I'd ever received. I don't remember my reply, but were you to ask me the question today, I would respond as follows: **A smart DM sees room for improvement.** In other words, a little humility is a good thing.

I don't profess to know everything about DMing, and gods know I can be lazy behind the DM screen. Only two things qualify me to write a weekly column focused on DM advice: (1) I've made more than my share of mistakes, and (2) I've learned from many of them. There's no substitute for experience, and everyone knows you learn more from mistakes than success.

Every serious DM, like every serious storyteller, develops a unique style. Just like skiers and painters, first you learn the basics, and then you experiment. I can tell you about all the things I do behind the DM screen, but my style is not your style. My education is not the same as your education. The things that inspire me as a DM aren't the same things that inspire you.

My education as a DM began by absorbing the contents of the **AD&D** *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1st and 2nd Edition), but it took years of running adventures and campaigns for me to develop a DMing style that made me comfortable. I didn't have the Internet to fall back on, so I pilfered tricks from other DMs as well as actors, directors, screenwriters, and novelists. I made a lot of conscious and unconscious choices along the way to suit my preferred style; for example, I've met DMs who are very animated behind the screen. My style is the polar opposite, being much more relaxed and still, except when necessity or variety demands that I flap my arms and honk at the top of my lungs like a loon.

These days, I develop my DMing skills through weekly practice and occasionally learn

new tricks by reading blogs written by other DMs. My favorite is the ENnie Award-winning **Gnome Stew**, which has the advantage of having several different contributors. Check it out; it's well worth your time. There's also a really good article written for a blog called Beneath the Screen titled "**Top 10 New Dungeon Master Mistakes**". The blog is no longer being updated, but the article presents sound DM advice in a clear, concise fashion. It focuses on constructive suggestions, which makes it doubly valuable to DMs looking to step up their games. Clearly, if you're reading this article, you're the type of DM who doesn't mind wasting a few minutes online reading about other DMs' experiences, so I figured I'd share a couple of my favorites.

LESSONS LEARNED

*What **one word** best describes your DMing style?*

If you can answer this question, then you're probably self-aware enough to know your strengths and limitations as a DM. If I had to describe my DMing style in one word, it would probably be **unflappable**. If you've ever watched the live **D&D** Penny Arcade games or listened to the podcasts, I think you'd probably agree with me. I wouldn't say it comes naturally; it's takes effort to be unflappable, but it's made DMing so easy and stress-free that I'm rarely thrown off my game by anything the players might do or say.

Case in point, here are three things that used to drive me crazy at the game table. They used to be pet peeves, but they no longer bother me. In fact, I've come to accept these behaviors as part of the default **D&D** game experience:

Players texting during the game: Don't care. All of my players have iPhones, which are like extensions of their bodies and brains. If by texting their friends or spouses they become momentarily distracted from the game, I don't take offense. They're just optimizing their time. When their turns come around, I'll get their attention easily enough.

Players not taking the bait. Don't care. In any given game session, I like to know where the characters are headed. However, my players are smart enough to know when I'm trying to lure them in a particular direction. As much as I hope they'll move forward, sometimes they veer left or right. Sometimes they stand still. Sometimes they turn around and walk back the way they came, just for the hell of it. Whatever. If they don't take the bait, I'll wing it. No problem. Hopefully they'll have a good time regardless.

Players who "cheat." Don't care. Sometimes the line between player knowledge and character knowledge gets blurry, and my players "forget" that their characters don't know as much as they do. Every so often, they make tactical decisions based on information their characters don't actually possess, typically when the party's in dire straits and a little "cheating" could save thousands of gold pieces in Raise Dead expenses. I'd probably do the same thing in their shoes, and as far as cheating goes, that's pretty mild. It used to bug the heck out of me for some reason. Not anymore. At least I don't have players who fudge their die rolls. ("Woohoo, another crit!" Yeah, *right.*)

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

THE OLD DM AND THE SEA

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT The campaign has ended, and my players are hounding me for information on when the next one will get underway. Before I kick off what I assume will be a multi-year, multi-level campaign, I want to make sure the character-building and encounter-building components of **D&D** Next are more or less locked down. Until then, I remain confined to my cabin, poring over navigational charts while my players go stir-crazy on deck, wondering when the ship will finally leave port and begin its long and glorious voyage.

Before work began in earnest on the next iteration of the **D&D** game, folks in R&D (myself included) ran a series of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Edition games for the express purpose of reminding ourselves what makes every edition withstand the test of time. For me, it was a great opportunity to rediscover old rules and relive moments that turned me into a lifetime **D&D** gamer.

More recently, I was one of several Wizards employees interviewed by filmmakers working on ***Dungeons & Dragons: A Documentary***, which got funded through Kickstarter last fall. As we reminisced about past editions of the game, it occurred to me that my DM experience is not confined to any one edition. I ran 1st Edition games for nine years, 2nd Edition games for eight years, 3rd Edition games for eight years, and 4th Edition games for five years. That's what you call a *well-rounded DMing experience*. Throw in a few non-**D&D** RPGs for variety's sake (**Marvel Super Heroes**, **Top Secret/S.I.**, **Gamma World**, and **Star Frontiers**, to name a few), and it's no

wonder I have so much to say on the topic of DMing.

I found 1st Edition exhilarating and terrifying. Most of the time I had no clue what I was doing. I didn't know how to create balanced encounters, and many of the rules that sounded very important were also very difficult to remember and/or adjudicate (case in point, the rules for surprise). Is it okay for the PCs to fight thirty trolls? What do you do when the party's 7th-level fighter is turned into a 1st-level fighter by a pack of energy-draining wraiths? Is it kosher to demand system shock rolls if the party finds itself standing in the presence of a god? You get the idea. In the back of my mind, I always felt I could be a better DM if only I had a *ring of invisibility* and used it to sneak into Gary's house on game nights so that I could watch the master at work. It never occurred to me that Gary might break or reinvent rules on the fly, which, I'm told, he did often and without regret.

I found 2nd Edition a little more liberating and much more forgiving, mostly because the core rulebooks went out of their way to tell me, "Hey, DM, only use the rules you like. And, by the way, if you can't remember how a rule works, make it up. It's your game." The 1st Edition rulebooks said the same thing, but this advice really took center stage in 2nd Edition. I was the boss, so naturally I started making up all sorts of crazy house rules. If a fighter could have 18/00 Strength, why couldn't a wizard have 18/00 Intelligence? Why can't elves and dwarves have dwelf babies? Heck, let's dispense with the class level caps placed upon nonhuman races and the alignment restrictions placed upon certain classes. Say "YES" to chaotic good half-orc paladins named Haxx Two-Pieces! (Remember, I was still a young DM.) If 2nd Edition taught me anything, it's that I can make the game my own, and to my credit, not all of my house rules tanked. I had standardized XP advancement rules for characters long before 3rd Edition did, and while I can't claim "at-will spells" are a Perkinsian invention, I remember tinkering with the notion in the early 1990s. I also did away with *energy drain* for the sake of sanity. The great thing about 2nd Edition, if I recall correctly, is that a DM could do no wrong . . . because there was no right way to play. I still had no clue how to create a balanced encounter, but *vive la difference!*

Third Edition rebuilt the game on a sturdy and level foundation. It had strong mathematical underpinnings and put more effort into balancing the various classes. The game demanded a lot from DMs (particularly at higher levels), but I appreciated the strides taken to determine how to make a challenging encounter. For the first time, I felt that I could rely on the rules to settle arguments at the game table, and thus focus my attention on creating adventures and wrapping my head around monster stat blocks. It was the first edition I worked on as a TSR/Wizards employee, so I was seeing the game from a whole new angle. The term "Behind the Curtain" springs to mind; the phrase was used in rulebook sidebars that explained why the game worked in certain ways, although the "behind the curtain" advice for magic item creation still causes my head to rip from my shoulders and fly about the room, screaming like a deranged penanggalan. Third Edition taught me that if I wanted to run a really good campaign, I needed 250,000 hours of prep time, but the payoff would be worth it, and my campaign would forever be immortalized in the hearts and minds of my players. And to its credit, 3rd Edition was kind enough to provide several excellent Adventure Paths, not to mention *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil*, for DMs without thousands of hours of prep time to spare.

Fourth Edition focused on making life easier for the DM, if not the player. Simpler monsters, easier ways to mix-and-match monsters by role, treasure parcels for fair magic item distribution, you name it. It got me thinking about how to build adventures that were not only fun roleplaying challenges but also tactically engaging. How can I use terrain to make this encounter more memorable? How can I combine two disparate monsters in a way my players have never seen before? Like every edition before it, it has flaws. It's hard to make an epic-level adventure that doesn't just feel like a heroic-tier adventure with higher attack bonuses and damage outputa challenge I hadn't really faced before as a DM. I remember when the Wednesday night group busted out of paragon tier into epic tier, and then promptly got blown to bits when their ship exploded the session after they turned 21st level. I remember thinking, "Ten more levels to go. How do I top that?" It takes a lot of gumption to keep a campaign alive for five years and thirty levelsa real test of a DM's fortitude and mettle. Fourth Edition forced me to deal with that particular problem, making me a better DM in the process.

LESSONS LEARNED

During the filming of the documentary, I was asked what "**D&D** Next" will mean for every previous edition of the game. My response was emphatic: No edition ever dies. Everyone has an edition they like best, and all of them are **D&D** through and through. Do we hope lots of people make **D&D** Next their experience of choice? Yes. Are we bothered if someone wants to play 1st Edition instead? No.

DMing, like **D&D**, is about exploration and discovery. It's safe to say that every edition survived has made me a better DM, because every edition is like a sea to be navigated, with its own storms and reefs and fog banks and remarkable discoveries. No two seas are the same, but once you've sailed them all, you know the world.

This year, we're celebrating the journey home, and as much as I hate trumpeting products in my advice column, I would like to draw your attention to some products that will help you as a DMand not in the traditional advice-giving or time-saving way. These aren't new products, per se, but rather re-releases of some golden oldies. In the back half of last year, we re-released the 1st Edition and 3rd Edition core rulebooks as premium-edition reprints, and very soon we're re-releasing the 2nd Edition core rulebooks in much the same fashion (not to mention hardcover compilations of the classic "S" and "A" series adventure modules). If you haven't tried any of these earlier editions, I urge you to assemble your players, get them to roll up new characters, and enjoy some kickass **D&D** the way we used to play it . . . the way some of us still play it. The experience will make you a better DM because you will face challenges you've never faced before and discover new ways to succeed and fail in the role.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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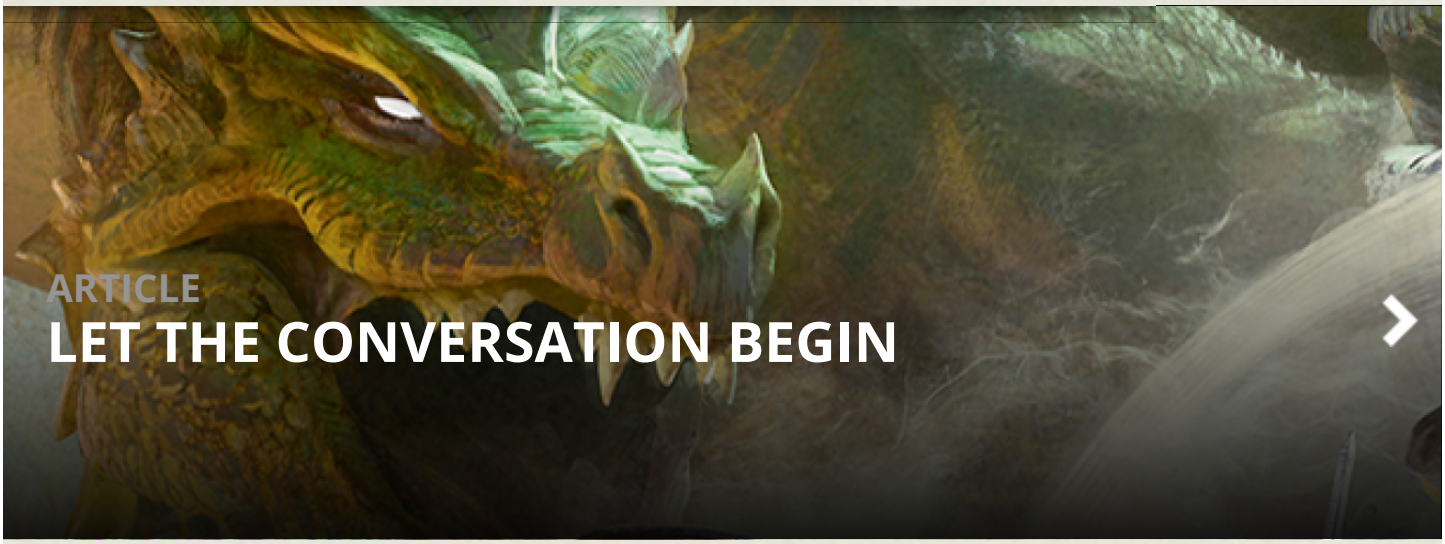
FEATURED ARTICLE

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

LET THE CONVERSATION BEGIN

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. The session begins in medias res, picking up where we left off the previous week. The heroes are trapped inside a military stronghold, fighting off dragonborn soldiers and wizards in league with a secret organization called the Vost Azaan. The organization's leader, Zarkhrysa, lies badly wounded at the heroes' feet, reduced to single-digit hit points. Oleander, the party's halfling rogue, deals the first attack of the evening, dropping Zarkhrysa to zero hit points before she can utter a single word. However, unbeknownst to the players, the villain has a special ability that revives her to 1 hit point and lets her "play dead."

When a squad of bluespawn godslayers storms the fortress, the heroes retreat into an extra-dimensional space created using Oleander's exodus knife and take Zarkhrysa's "corpse" with them. Baharoosh, the party's dragonborn rogue, makes a successful Insight check and realizes that the villain is playing dead. He tries to stab her but misses, giving her time to chide the heroes for opposing her plot to bring stability to the Dragovar Empire by installing a new emperor on the throne. However, her villainous monologue is cut short by Baharoosh's second attack, and she dies from a slashed throat.

A nonplayer character (NPC) is nothing but a cardboard figure without the DM to flesh it out, and nothing makes an NPC come alive more than good dialogue. But here's the thing: You can't really prepare the dialogue ahead of time. You have to wait for opportunities to arise and then wing it, and sometimes the results are

underwhelming. Believe me, I know. I was delighted when Baharoosh slashed Zarkhrysa's throat, because that conversation was going nowhere.

Much of my "adventure planning" involves me thinking about the NPCs in my campaign and ways to make them "come alive." I like to think of clever things for them to sayrebukes and rebuttals that don't sound too cliched. Unfortunately, I tend to forget these little gems by the time the game session rolls around. Writing them down doesn't help. I've tried that, and more often than not, the opportunity to use a pre-planned snippet of pithy dialogue never comes up. My players are too unpredictable. Still, it's a fun thought exercise.

Dialogue between PCs and NPCs is largely improvised, as you well know, and sometimes you get lucky and spark a really interesting conversation. A good tÃªte-a-tÃªte adds drama and realism to any encounter. However, we can't all be Aaron Sorkin. It's the supreme test of a DM's skill to keep the conversation interesting and to portray NPCs in a way that's both honest and memorable.

Every DM, like every actor, has a different range. Some actors transform themselves so completely that they vanish into their roles, while other actors tend to play every role the same way. Not every actor can portray a schizophrenic or a samurai. My range is limited, so when I am confronted with an impromptu roleplaying opportunity, I draw upon four distinct aspects of my own personality and vacillate between caricatures and realistic portrayals using these four archetypes as touchstones. Once in a blue moon, I'll make a concerted effort to stretch beyond my range, with mixed results. For example, you might be awesome at portraying emotional or loquacious NPCs. Alas, I am not.

...AND I CAN TELL THAT DESPITE OUR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES WE HAVE LOTS IN COMMON! YOU KNOW, I EVEN OWN A BONE NECKLACE JUST LIKE YOURS!

LESSONS LEARNED

Every NPC with a major speaking role has a base personality trait that governs how he or she acts and reacts to the player characters. Here are four base archetypes I use often.

The Authority: Here's an NPC whom the players love to hate. The Authority speaks with conviction (not unlike Kevin Spacey in *Se7en*). No matter his alignment, he believes what he's saying is true, either because it IS true or because he has a warped sense of reality. His tone can be dictatorial and condescending, or it can be genuinely sincere and well meaning. Here are some sound bites the arrogant NPC might use in conversation:

- "Don't play the fool."
- "You're not making any sense."
- "You know I'm right."
- "The discussion is over."

The Authority doesn't mince words. He's blunt. He gets to the point. He's willing to listen to the rabble (up to a point), but he's no diplomat. The purpose of conversation is to communicate his point of view and present well-reasoned arguments, and to quash debate. When flustered by all the stupid people around him, he might resort to insults or sarcasm to assert his superiority.

- "It's like I'm talking to an ogre."
- "What am I, a crystal ball?"
- "Alas, if only your mind were as sharp as your sword."

Quick Trick #1: The Authority likes to steer the conversation. When speaking in character, I try to interrupt the players and talk over them. I treat the exchange like a flurry of punches: short, forceful jabs building to a knockout conversation ender. "And that's why I'm better than you," is a nice one.

The Sage: Players who lean on this chap for answers or guidance are rarely disappointed, because the Sage has great clarity of thought and diplomacy. Unfortunately, he often has a roundabout way of getting to the point, relying heavily on cautionary tales or verses that sound like they were plucked from fortune cookies. This can be both funny and infuriating to players. The Sage knows that it's unwise to offend a powerful band of adventurers, so when called upon to assist the party, he's careful not to make decisions for the heroes or express his arguments is a disrespectful way (rather like Pete Postlethwaite's lawyer character, Mister Kobayashi, in *The Usual Suspects*). Here are some sound bites the Sage might use:

- "There's an old saying . . ."
- "Would that I had all the answers. I'd be as rich as a king."
- "Forgive me for saying so, but perhaps you're going about this the wrong way."
- "Do you know the story of the farmer who lost her family to a pack of werewolves? Consumed by grief and rage, she spent her family's wealth on a silvered blade and hired a skilled ranger with silvered arrows to lead her to the monsters' den in the heart of the Fellhaunt Forest, and together they slaughtered the pack. To her dismay, the ranger was grievously wounded in battle. Before they could reach civilization, the curse of lycanthropy took hold. No one knows

what became of the farmer, but the ranger formed a new pack and terrorizes the realm to this day. Evil, my friends, can't always be slain with a sword."

Sometimes the Sage is "out of touch" with the world around him, not unlike the Sphinx from *Mystery Men*. He might spew the occasional cryptic *non sequitur*, mention things that have no relevance to the topic at hand, or hearken back to earlier conversations, making his train of thought hard to follow.

- "What was I saying?"
- "The well is dry, friend. The well is dry."
- "I'm reminded of the time I met Sultan Malak al'Harran and his third bride, what's-her-name."
- "Of course, I could be wrong. Many of the books I've read were written by wizards, and one should always be suspicious of their works."

Quick Trick #2: If I'm stuck, I'll have the Sage veer off topic or lapse into storytelling mode. He might tell a story that sheds light on his past, or he might recount a fable from his childhood. He might share his latest conspiracy theory or a cryptic bit of verse that holds no real meaning. It buys time, and with luck, one of my players will discern some connection or shred of relevance and make something of it. If not, the NPC can simply shrug his shoulders and say, "Come to think of it, I'm not entirely sure that's relevant."

The Schemer: The Schemer wants to elevate his status or reap the rewards he feels he so richly deserves, and the adventurers can be useful tools for achieving his ends. That doesn't mean he's evil. A benevolent temple priest might play upon a paladin's sense of duty to bring a criminal to justice, knowing full well that the criminal's capture will garner favors from the king. The Schemer might even regard the player characters as close friends, directing his plots toward others who are less likely to uncover his shenanigans and rip out his lungs. The Schemer fills the party's ears with compliments and platitudes, cleverly or not so cleverly redirecting conversations so as not to lose credibility or advantage. Think of Paul Reiser's spineless corporate parasite, Carter J. Burke, from *Aliens* as you weigh the following Schemer-worthy sound bites:

- "I sleep very well at night, thank you."
- "A thousand apologies. I meant no offense."
- "Can I give you some friendly advice?"
- "You, sir, are much smarter than I. Or is that 'smarter than me'? I'm not really sure."

If the players are aware of the NPC's scheming nature, they can put his skills to use for their own gain. It never hurts to have a friend who lies like a rug for a living and who can turn a clever phrase or help untangle complex plots.

- "You wound me with your accusations!"

- "What can I say? I'm a polecat in a dog-eat-dog world."
- "If I help you put down this assassins' guild, what's in it for me?"

Quick Trick #3: A Schemer likes to answer questions with questions, and practically speaking, a question framed as an answer can create tension and make conversations much more lively. A question such as "Where's your boss?" might lead the Schemer to reply, "What makes you think I have a boss?" or "That's not really the question you should be asking, is it?" This was the stock-and-trade approach for nearly every government character in *The X-Files*, and it's hilariously infuriating.

The Brooder: Far from the scintillating conversationalist, the Brooder rarely speaks unless spoken to, and even then the player characters need a crowbar to pry words from his lips. (I'm reminded of Peter Stormare's brooding blond psychopath in *Fargo*.) He's a godsend for the DM who has trouble weaving dialogue on the flya monosyllabic utterance here, a fractured half-sentence there, and that's that. The Brooder might have a hundred things on his mind, but he keeps his thoughts to himself. His actions, however minimal, speak volumes. Occasionally, he might open up and spill his guts, but only when the stars are perfectly aligned or circumstance warrants. He might talk openly with one character while avoiding conversation with everyone else. Some players like the mystery that surrounds him, while others harbor grave suspicions and question the reasons behind his unyielding silence. He comes up thin in the sound bite department:

- "Oops."
- "Go away."
- "Don't make me hit you."
- "I'll take first watch."

One of the more brooding characters in my campaign is a dragonborn assassin who recently converted to Bahamut's faith. Unlike Zarkhrysa, he survived having his throat slashed, although it pains him to speak. He doesn't talk often, but when he does, his whispered words carry a ton of weight.

- "Oh, shi"
- "Your skin will make a fine cloak."
- "That makes me very angry."

Quick Trick #4: NPCs who decline to speak or lack the capacity to speak are fun for DMs because they shift the burden of conversation to the players. A mute NPC might communicate through misspelled written words or crude drawings, while an NPC who has taken a vow of silence might communicate using a rudimentary sign language taught to him by a reclusive order of monks. A DM can have a lot of fun with that.

Of course, these are but a sampling of NPC archetypes. I've included a few more in this week's poll. If you can think of another archetype, feel free to mention it in the comments field. Don't be afraid to throw in a few dialogue snippets for good measure, but be warned: I might steal your ideas for my home campaign.

ARTICLE

BEST SUPPORTING CHARACTER

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Jeremy Crawford plays Alex von Hyden, a respected wizard who carries within him the spirit of an ancient dragon sorcerer. Peter Schaefer plays a greedy halfling rogue named Oleander, who commands a vast network of spies. Whenever the party is beset by indecision, it's usually Alex or Oleander who pushes the group in a particular direction. Whenever the party faces a new threat, it's usually Alex or Oleander who steers the party's response. Whenever a roleplaying opportunity arises, it's usually one or the other who drives the conversation. Alex and Oleander are actively engaged in the politics of the Dragovar Empire, and their fortunes are tied to the empire's ultimate fate, whereas most of the other characters have no such connection or interest.

When neither Alex nor Oleander is present, things get weirdly interesting, as happened this week when both Jeremy and Peter were absent. Suddenly, player characters accustomed to supporting roles were thrust into the limelight and into an awkward roleplaying situation for which they were sorely underequipped.

The previous session had ended with the party crashing a dragonborn masquerade. The time had come to confront several nobles guilty of conspiring to overthrow the Dragovar government, and both Alex and Oleander had ideas about how to proceed. With neither character present, the torch got passed to the party's quintet of uncouth halfwits (played with great aplomb by Matt Sernett, Nick DiPetrillo, Jeff Alvarez, Shawn Blakeney, and Stan!). They tried using *hats of disguise* to pass themselves off as

agents of the Vost Miraj, the imperial spy agency. However, when their accusations were adroitly deflected back at them, they did what you'd expect them to do. They dropped the charade, gave up the war of words, and turned the masquerade into a bloodbath.

This past Monday night reminded me of one of those episodes of *The X-Files* where FBI agents Mulder and Scully are, for the most part, completely absent, and instead we get a whole hour of the Lone Gunmen and their wacky hijinks. When the characters who usually drive the plot aren't around, what's a DM to do? Cancel the game? *I think not*.

Although I try to shine the spotlight on every player character in my campaign, the truth is that not all PCs get equal "screen time." Certain characters become more prominent and crucial to the unfolding story than others. In this respect, the PCs in my campaign are a lot like the adventuring company in *The Hobbit*, which contains both "lead" characters and supporting characters. Imagine *The Hobbit* without Bilbo, Thorin, or Gandalf. In the absence of these "leads," the story begins to lose its relevance and impact.

As a **D&D** campaign unfolds, it gradually becomes clear which PCs are core to the campaign and which ones are tangential. Sometimes the campaign will shift focus in a way that elevates a supporting character to lead status or turns a lead character into a supporting one. This can also happen when a new player joins the group or when a player leaves. Either event can change the party dynamic.

Recently, I started watching *The West Wing* a show I'd put off for years because I was too busy to allow myself to watch it. The show was supposed to revolve around various members of the presidential staff, in particular the character of Sam Seaborn (a speechwriter played by Rob Lowe). The show's creator, Aaron Sorkin, envisioned that the President would play only a minor role. However, as the series developed, President Jed Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) became the central character, and Sam Seaborn became ancillary until he was eventually written out altogether. The show's other supporting characters are given more-or-less equal attention, moving in and out of the spotlight on a week-to-week basis, but there's no question that Bartlet is the heart of the show. It's no coincidence that the series ends with him leaving office at the end of his second term.

An ensemble TV show features a combination of lead characters and supporting characters. Offhand, I can't think of any show with a large central cast whose characters carry equal weight and relevance; not everyone can play Jean-Luc Picard or Spartacus or King Henry VIII. Your typical **D&D** campaign is similar in this respect: there are both lead characters without whom the campaign would lose much of its dramatic *oomph*, and supporting characters without whom the party would be "bland and undermanned."

'Tis the season for awards shows, the Oscars being foremost among them. Were you to hand out nominations for Best Supporting Character in your home campaign, which of your PCs would qualify?

LESSONS LEARNED

As with characters in episodic TV shows, a **D&D** character's importance is determined largely by its connection to the story and, to an equally large extent, by the personality of the player portraying it. Players who want their characters to be the fulcrum of the campaign tend to spend more time fleshing out their backgrounds and chasing quests that contribute to their characters' development. Players who don't mind supporting roles tend to be less interested in character development and more interested in having fun at the game table. They see their characters as important contributors to the party, but not necessarily drivers of the story.

The distinction between lead characters and supporting characters is an academic one. While I'm DMing at the game table, I'm too busy to care about such differentiation, and in play, I'm more interested in keeping all of my players entertained. It's something I'm more apt to think about between sessions, when I'm deconstructing the campaign. Which characters are monumentally important to the campaign's survival? Which characters have become peripheral, and to what extent are my players okay with that? I'll talk to my players and solicit their opinions. They like to reflect on the campaign, imagine what might happen next, and talk about what their characters (or the party as a whole) should try to accomplish. It's these sorts of between-session discussions that led to my realization that there are these two kinds of characters in the party.

Here's a question that you, the DM, might try asking your players at some point during your campaign (if you haven't done so already): **Do you see your character as more of a "plot driver" or a "supporting character"?** I think it's a fair question to ask, and you'll probably get some thought-provoking answers. Also, it's not a loaded question; there isn't a "wrong" answer. In fact, there's nothing wrong with choosing to play a supporting character. I, for one, prefer the supporting character role when I'm not behind the DM screen. As a player, I find it less of a burden. It lets me to do something I'm rarely inclined to do as a DM: relinquish control. When a player tells me that he envisions his current character as more of a "supporting character," I don't need to spend an inordinate amount of time thinking of ways to make the character more pivotal to the plot, or the plot more connected to the character.

The truth is, many players are comfortable letting other party members drive the story (for the most part), and it's not the DM's job to push players outside of their comfort zones. While it's satisfying to play a character instrumental to the campaign, some player characters would rather steal the spotlight occasionally than have it shining on them constantly. Besides that, if you look at any ensemble TV show, it's usually the supporting characters that are the most fun to watch and have all the best lines!

Lastly, it's important to remember that your campaign can survive without its leads, at least for a session or two, particularly if you have players who don't mind "stepping up" when the usual plot-drivers are absent. It worked out well in my Monday night game, but don't think for one minute I'm ready to throw my leads by the wayside. After all, the Lone Gunmen worked great as supporting characters on *The X-Files*, but their spinoff show tanked. I wouldn't want my campaign to suffer the same fate.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

ARTICLE

ULTERIOR MOTIVES

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Arkhalia Kelx is a noble dragonborn widow who, according to some, hides a dark secret. There are rumors that she was involved in the assassination of her husband a high-ranking officer in the Dragovar Empire. However, no proof of her involvement was ever found. Still, the scandal pushed her to the fringe of noble society. Much earlier in the campaign, two of the PCs (the elf ranger Kithvolar and Oleander the halfling rogue) broke into Arkhalia's residence, hoping to find something they could use against her. Finding nothing, they concluded that she was either innocent or masterful at covering her tracks.

Recently, the heroes thwarted another conspiracy against the Dragovar Empire, this time a plot to supplant the legitimate imperial heir with a usurper with ties to two corrupt noble houses. The heroes killed the usurper and exposed the various conspirators in the midst of a dragonborn masquerade. Many in attendance were grateful to see the vile conspiracy thwarted, including Arkhalia Kelx, who was counted among the guests. As things settled down, she took Kithvolar aside and quietly confessed to the murder of her husband. When asked why, she replied, "I see now that the Dragovar Empire can no longer survive on secrets." If the admission was a clever ploy to gain the party's trust, it worked perfectly. Kithvolar was so struck by the confession that he didn't even think to ask Arkhalia why she conspired to murder her husband. He simply let her go. As the campaign spirals toward its imminent conclusion, one wonders if her reasons will ever come to light. . . .

I relish campaigns laced with intrigue, and I enjoy the depth it brings to the worlds I create. However, creating intrigue is not easy. For intrigue to exist at all, you need the player characters to feel like they're tangled in a web from which there's no easy escape. As I've stated previously, one way to add intrigue to your campaign is to give every NPC a secret. Secrets make your world a much more interesting and confounding place. But it takes more than secrets to create intrigue. Secrets must somehow be revealed, preferably when it makes the most dramatic sense. What could be worse than a campaign littered with secrets that never come to light, or a secret revealed without so much as a gasp or shriek?

So let's talk about **motives** and **ulterior motives**, and how we can use them to deliver and exploit NPC secrets.

NPCs need **motives** logical reasons why they act and behave they way they do. Player characters want to understand what makes an NPC tick, and a logical motive does exactly that. A motive by itself doesn't need to intrigue players; it merely provides context to help players make sense of the NPC's mindset and behavior. Here are three examples of NPCs with motives around which we can build some serious intrigue:

NPC #1: The overprotective half-orc sheriff of a rural township gives adventurers a hard time because he thinks they're a threat to his authority.

NPC #2: A racist innkeeper incessantly badmouths the half-orc sheriff because he's a cantankerous dwarf with an unbridled hatred of orcs and their ilk.

NPC #3: A shady tiefling wizard pays the innkeeper a hefty sum for a private room because she's working on a new spell and doesn't want to be disturbed.

The half-orc sheriff wants to protect the town, the dwarf innkeeper wants to make the sheriff's life miserable, and the tiefling wizard wants to be left alone. These motives define what the NPCs want and provide clues to how they might act.

Now imagine building an adventure around the idea of the local inn catching fire shortly after the PCs arrive. How might these three NPCs react to the situation? Well, the half-orc sheriff might organize a chain gang to help put out the fire, hoping to win points with the cantankerous innkeeper while accusing the PCs of starting the blaze. The innkeeper might hire the PCs to determine the cause of the fire because he wants to make the sheriff look bad. Whether she had anything to do with the fire or not, the tiefling wizard might try to sneak away amid the chaos, or she might stick around, blame the incident on her invisible imp familiar, and promise to pay damages to avoid a drawn-out investigation.

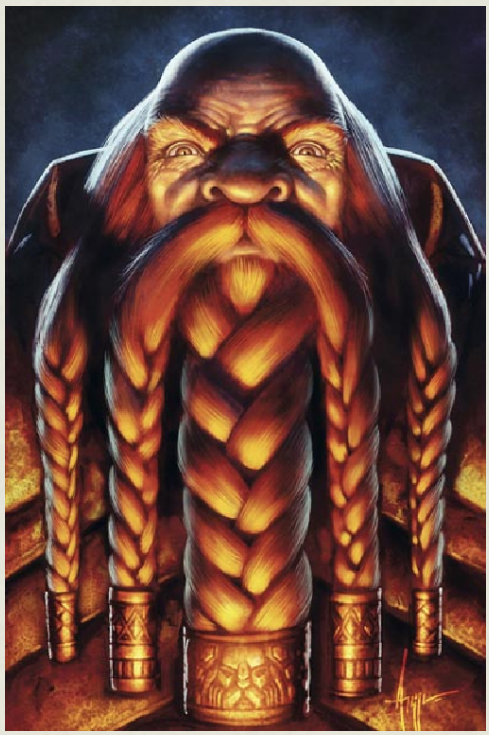
Players can usually figure out NPC motives by using logic, by paying attention to described behavior, or through roleplaying (coupled with the occasional Insight or Intimidate check, perhaps). It's the ulterior motives they have trouble discerning.

Ulterior motives are the bedrock of great intrigue. The wonderful thing about them is that they're logical, and yet not readily apparent. You have to dig to learn an NPC's ulterior motive, and when you find it, you realize that it makes perfect sense given

what you know about the individual. NPCs keep their ulterior motives hidden because to expose them would cost them some advantage or opportunity, and there's something sinister about that. The other important thing to note is that any NPC even the good-aligned ones can have ulterior motives.

Not every NPC needs an ulterior motive. The shopkeeper who tries to sell the party an overpriced magic item doesn't need a more sinister underlying agenda. Save ulterior motives for NPCs who are more inclined to get a lot of "face time" in your campaign, if only because it takes time to unearth ulterior motives. Like regular motives, ulterior motives must be logical. They must always run parallel to an NPC's more obvious ambitions and desires, such that the motive and ulterior motive never collide. An insane wizard trying to summon a demonic horde can't have an ulterior motive that involves the restoration of his sanity; that just doesn't make any logical sense. If the wizard knew he was insane, he probably wouldn't be opening a portal to the Abyss!

By way of illustration, let's dream up some logical ulterior motives for the three example NPCs described earlier:



Half-Orc Sheriff (NPC #1): The overprotective sheriff wants to impress the king by maintaining law and order, but he feels politically threatened because of his mixed heritage. A bitter rival sends spies to watch over him, and the sheriff is convinced that the dwarf innkeeper has been feeding them false reports. The innkeeper's dealings with adventurers fuel the sheriff's worst fears, and he'd like nothing more than to change the innkeeper's opinion of him or, failing that, run the dwarf out of town.

> *Clear Motive:* The overbearing sheriff wants to protect his charges.
> *Ulterior Motive:* The sheriff wants to remove a thorn in his side.

Dwarf Innkeeper (NPC #2): The innkeeper has been trying to ruin the sheriff for a while, and not just because the sheriff is a half-orc. The sheriff's predecessor was secretly allied with evil brigands and relied on the innkeeper to serve as a "middle man." The innkeeper's establishment was used to shelter fugitives and sequester stolen goods. The innkeeper would like nothing more than to rekindle his relationship with the brigands, even if that means setting fire to the inn to make the sheriff look bad.

> *Clear Motive:* The innkeeper opposes the sheriff because he's a half-orc.
> *Ulterior Motive:* The innkeeper wants to do business with evil brigands.

Tiefling Wizard (NPC #3): The tiefling wizard means no harm, but she seeks to join a secret society of mages, and her acceptance into the lower ranks hinges on the successful casting of a difficult and complex spell. She has summoned an imp to help her in the days leading up to a fateful meeting with a member of the society, but time

is running out. The conniving imp has convinced the wizard to entreat with infernal forces that have the power to help her achieve her goal, but at greater cost.

> *Clear Motive:* The wizard needs seclusion to research a spell.
> *Ulterior Motive:* The wizard will do whatever it takes to gain membership in a secret society.

By ascribing motives and ulterior motives to a small cast of NPCs, we can set the stage for an adventure in which a half-orc sheriff, a dwarf innkeeper, and a tiefling wizard all have reasons for setting fire to the local inn. It then becomes the your job to embroil the PCs in the mystery and the players' job to discover who actually did it. Intrigue, after all, is about possibilities, doubts, and the discovery of truth.

LESSONS LEARNED

"There's the truth . . . and then there'sTHE TRUTH."

Troy McClure (Phil Hartman)
The Simpsons

Years ago, before I started writing The Dungeon Master Experience, I brainstormed a list of topics that I hoped to cover before the end of the series. "Intrigue" was the #1 topic on that list. Sadly, it's not the easiest thing to talk about. In fact, I have an easier time creating intrigue in a **D&D** campaign than I have explaining how to do it. (Would it surprise you to learn this article took six hours to write? It sure surprised the hell out of me.)

It's easy to create simple, straightforward motives for NPCs that help to steer their behavior and actions: *A bandit lord robs from the rich to feed the poor. A nobleman conspires to murder his tiresome wife and marry his younger mistress. A knight hires the heroes to help slay a marauding dragon and deliver its head to the king.* Motives get at the truth of why people think and act they way they do. Motives never lie. In a **D&D** campaign, you need NPCs with motives to foster intrigue, which comes when you start layering on secrets. Ulterior motives are secrets, but coming up with good ones is a challenge for which I have no simple workarounds.

An ulterior motive makes a terrific secret because it speaks to an NPC's hidden desires, and while most NPCs don't care if their base motives are readily apparent, they usually try to keep their ulterior motives under wraps. It's not enough that the bandit lord robs wealthy caravans to feed the poor; he also carves his initials into the sides of plundered wagons because he's vainglorious and wants to be remembered in the history books as a true "man of the people." The noble who marries his secret paramour does so because he's strapped for coin and needs her dowry to pay off his gambling debts. The dragon-slaying knight is a coward at heart and knows he cannot face the wyrm alone, so he expects the PCs to do all the fighting while he stands before the king and takes the credit. Every time an NPC's ulterior motive comes to light, the players feel like they've just turned over another stone in the campaign and found something crawling underneath. But that's not even the best part . . .

Once players begin to realize there's more to your NPCs than superficial motives, they begin to see mysteries and conspiracies and ulterior motives everywhere

(sometimes where none exist), and in that exhilarating and terrifying moment, you see the intrigue begin to take on a life of its own, and you realize how readily it feeds on itself and grows, and how little effort it takes to keep it alive.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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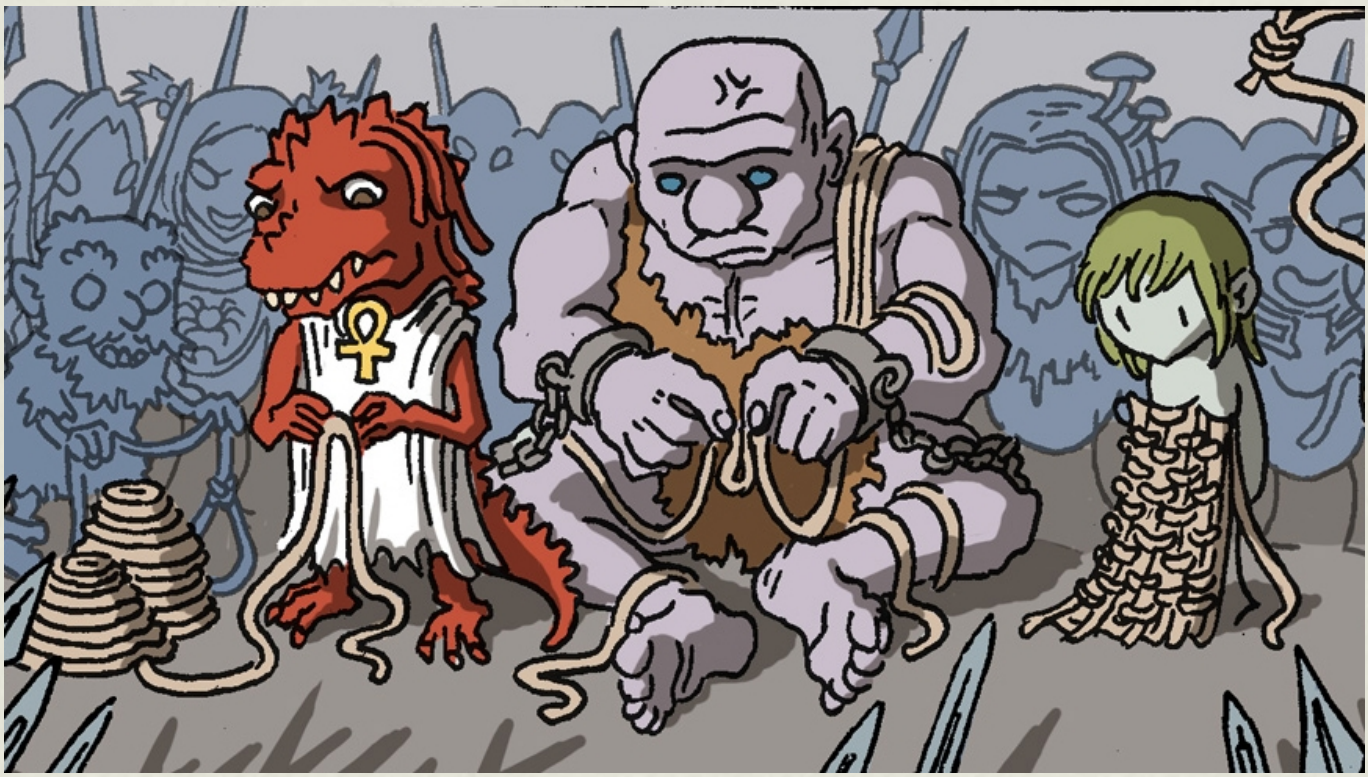

OUT OF THE ABYSS WALKTHROUGH POSTER

CARTOON - 11/26/2015

By Jason Thompson

Jason Thompson illustrates the misfortunates of a group of adventurers as they navigate the Underdark and play through the story featured in Out of the Abyss.

MORE INFO

ARTICLE

WHERE'S THE LOVE?

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Their love was a tempest. Yuriel (played by Nick DiPetrillo) was a stormy genasi sea captain, and Pearl (a nonplayer character) was the prickly genasi first mate who questioned his every order. They argued a lot, and then out of nowhere, Yuriel proposed. The next session, after the fastest whirlwind romance in history, they were hitched. The session after that, they were both dead.

A successful **D&D** campaign incorporates many different genres and themes. Variety keeps the players entertained week after week, and so a good DM routinely shakes things up. A single campaign might include swashbuckling on the high seas, a harrowing exploration of a haunted house, a murder investigation at a local carnival, a political scandal between rival merchant houses, and a tense negotiation with a greedy dragon. When I look back at the campaigns I've run, I see a lot of familiar themes again and again: deception, isolation, intrigue, horror, humor, war, loss, and vengeance, just to name a few. However, one important theme is consistently underplayed.

Love may be a many-splendored thing, not to mention the most fertile of dramatic themes. However, I've never run a campaign or played in one, for that matter in which two player characters were married or in love, nor have I made a concerted effort to create interesting love triangles between PCs and NPCs. For one thing, I find real-life romance awkward. Also, I'm pretty sure that my players enjoy **D&D** because they get to beat up the bad guys, win the treasure, and become more powerful and influential

in the campaign world. They don't play **D&D** because they're looking for some vicarious romantic thrill to fill heart-shaped voids in their lives. They also have understandable misgivings about their characters having serious relationships with NPCs because their DM is of a mind to put those love interests in jeopardy. (What DM could resist?) The Yuriel"“Pearl debacle wasn't what you'd call a "love for the ages." When Pearl screamed "Yes!" and threw herself into Yuriel's arms, the other players laughed their asses off because the love affair had all the romance of a sardine sandwich.

My concerns with love as a **D&D** theme are that (a) it takes a long time to develop naturally and (b) it's a hard thing to fake without it seeming weird. I can make vengeance, hatred, and loss feel real, but love? Not so much. The last thing I want to do is make my players uncomfortable by turning the campaign into a soap opera. That doesn't mean I can't have fun portraying a playful and promiscuous tiefling spy who likes to tease men and women with her tail, or a genasi first mate so lovably prickly that she makes sea urchins blush. These are caricatures bereft of serious emotional depth, played mainly for laughs. However, I'm deluding myself if I think I can create an NPC guaranteed to capture the heart of one of my player characters. I'm not saying it *couldn't* happen, but at the pace my campaign moves, it's hard to carve out the time it takes to make that relationship seem real.

I'll be the first to admit that the Yuriel"“Pearl relationship never got a fair shake. Yuriel died rather unexpectedly (mostly due to bad die rolls, as happens often). However, rather than go the Raise Dead route, I had the grieving widow petition an emissary of Vecna to reanimate her dead husband, replacing his heart with an artificial one that pumped necrotic sludge through his undead veins. (Necrophilia . . . now there's a theme for your next **D&D** campaign.) Not long thereafter, the party's ship came under attack, and Pearl was killed in the crossfire. A few rounds later, Yuriel (again the victim of bad die rolls) literally had the necrotic heart ripped out of his body before he was unceremoniously tossed overboard. The other characters were never cool with Yuriel's undead transformation. As his corpse sank to the bottom of the ocean, the party wizard put the last nail in Yuriel's coffin by blowing his necrotic heart to bits with a *magic missile*.

Take THAT, love.

LESSONS LEARNED

I'm cool with a player creating a character who has strong emotional ties to other characters or NPCs. In fact, I think that's awesome and very brave. I'm also not against relationships evolving as the campaign matures. Relationships add drama and dimension to any campaign. However, I'm happy to let my players take the lead on that one. If they want to pursue romantic liaisons with NPCs or with each other, I would like to think I'm man enough to let those relationships blossom or run their course and not go out of my way to destroy them (my heart-wrenching Monday night antics notwithstanding).

Over the years, I've chatted with players and DMs for whom love is a major campaign theme. Usually that's because their gaming groups include married couples or lovebirds who've created characters with strong emotional ties to one another that reflect their own relationships (which is not to say all groups with mated players have emotionally entangled characters). Call me a terrible person, but when two character are in love, I wonder what happens if one of them is eaten by an otyugh. When I ask other DMs how they deal with this sort of "typical" **D&D** situation, I get all sorts of great answers everything from "My campaign is more about relationships than fighting monsters, so it's not really an issue" to "We have a real-life funeral and wake for the fallen character." I remember meeting one enthusiastic **D&D** player who told me that her character, a paladin of Helm, had been married to an assassin for twelve years . . . and I'm talkin' real time AND in-game time. Not surprisingly, her husband of fifteen years played the assassin. I couldn't help but think, *Lucky for them I'm not their DM.* Putting aside my wonder at a campaign lasting twelve years, I was impressed that their DM could exercise such restraint in allowing the relationship to survive. I also

had a tough time reconciling the paladin's conflicting vows . . . until I reminded myself that (a) love has no boundaries, (b) internal struggles are fun, and (c) stranger things can happen in the **D&D** multiverse. It tells me so much about the power of this game, if not the power of love.

When I analyze the prevailing themes of my campaign, I ask myself, "Where's the love?" It's nowhere to be seen. That's because my players and I aren't looking for a campaign with serious emotional overtones or undertones. We err toward action, adventure, and the very manly swinging of swords, but we so rarely flirt with romance. Methinks one cannot slay a dragon and love at the same time, and my players would rather slay dragons and then go home to their significant others. As for me, I like to lavish attention on my campaign. I'm not ashamed to say it's been a real love affairfive good years with no complaints. I'm sad it will be over soon, but that's the way it goes.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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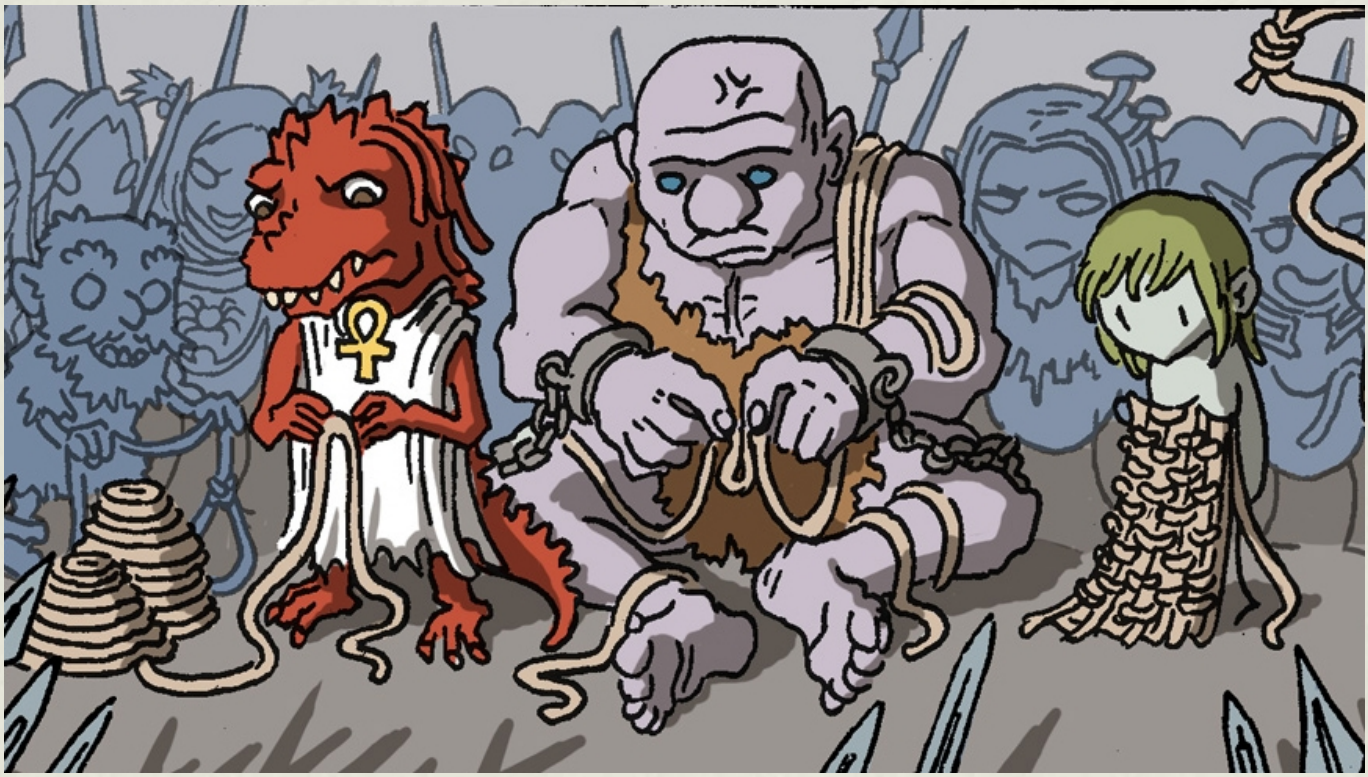

ARTICLE

A WORLD WORTH SAVING

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

MONDAY NIGHT. Two party members landed in prison for meddling in the affairs of the Vost Miraj, the counterintelligence agency of the Dragovar Empire. The Vost Miraj prefers to incarcerate enemies of the state rather than kill them not only because it's good politics but also because it makes more sense in a world where people can be raised from the dead. The imperial prison-island of Zardkarath, ruled by an adamantine dragon named Mheletros, makes Alcatraz look like a youth hostel.

Conventional DM wisdom suggests that the logical course of action is to plan an adventure around a jailbreak. Not a bad idea, but the party members who aren't behind bars have bigger problems to deal with. I decided to have a good-aligned group of NPCs called the Knights of Ardyn storm the prison to free one of their own members. In the course of doing so, they freed the imprisoned PCs as well. It all happened quite fast, with the prisoners being taken to safety through a portal, and there were a couple good roleplaying moments, as one might expect. But in the end, it was a group of NPCs who brought the PCs back together. You might call that "stealing the party's thunder," but my players weren't complaining. Their characters had more important things to do.

A campaign needs to earn the players' respect if it has any chance of survival. Too many potentially awesome campaigns get ripped to shreds by disaffected and disenfranchised players, and for good reason.

In a few weeks, I'll be traveling to Boston for PAX East, and I guarantee there will be DMs in attendance whose campaigns have been turned into chew-toys by players driven to obnoxious behavior. Are your players doing their utmost to sabotage your campaign and make your life behind the DM screen a living hell? Are you players so apathetic to the events of your campaign that they'd rather kill time in a tavern or set it on fire than chase a quest? If the answer is yes, I have a good guess as to why: your NPCs aren't doing their jobs very well.

Last year, I was listening to the DVD commentary that accompanied an episode of *Mad Men*, the award-winning TV series about commercial advertising in the 1960s. Matthew Weiner, the show's creator and lead writer, hit the nail on the head when he said (and I'm paraphrasing here) that audiences will forgive a character's many faults as long as that character is really good at his or her job. In other words, no one wants to hang around people who are unpleasantly incompetent. I hold that a **D&D** campaign is no different: If the PCs think they're the only ones capable of doing their jobs well, they see the campaign world as a nightmare and begin to attack it directly. If your players think your NPCs are a bunch of ass-hats and nincompoops, they're doing themselves and you a big favor by setting fire to the world.

If you want your campaign to resonate with players, you need to create a world worth saving. The easiest way to do that is to make the majority of the non-hostile NPCs in your world good at what they do and well disposed toward the adventurers. If the village priest is sympathetic without being sanctimonious, the PCs will care what happens to him and his flock. If the local bartender charges fair prices, tells a good joke, and throws the heroes the occasional free ale, the players will feel less inclined to burn his establishment to the ground. If the king is smart, politically savvy, and fond of adventurers, the players will be more likely to put their characters on the line when the kingdom is threatened than if he's a condescending jerk with no regard for his most worthy subjects. It sounds so simple, but many campaigns are left in shambles by player characters who couldn't, for one reason or another, abide the people they were supposed to protect.

LESSONS LEARNED

Almost every creature that appears in a typical **D&D** adventure is dead-set on killing the PCs or making their lives miserable, and most players expect that. (You can't have a campaign without conflict, after all.) However, when the PCs return to town after slaying the dragon, they don't expect the sheriff to treat them like 1st-level chumps or the innkeeper to charge them 1 cp for a good night's sleep. They don't expect the mayor to immediately shove another quest down their throats because the village has proven itself completely unable to defend itself from anything more than a rat infestation.

You want to create a world worth saving? Here are three keys to help you succeed:

Have an NPC show some initiative. Here's a good example: While the characters are investigating a series of murders in a large city, a gang of assassins jumps them in a darkened alley. During the fight, one of the assassins is wounded and flees. Instead of making the PCs chase down the miscreant, have a city guard or helpful passerby tackle the assassin and thwart the escape. Or, have a couple irksome street urchins

on a rooftop hurl rocks at the assassin to harry him. Suddenly, it feels like the world is on the party's side for a change!

Have an NPC throw the party a bone. Imagine the party is paying an NPC wizard to craft a magic item or an NPC priest to raise a dead character. In addition to doing what he or she is paid to do, the NPC might throw in a free "upgrade" to the magic item or a free batch of healing potions the party can use at some later date. Of course, you don't need to bribe players with magic items to make them like your world. Even the simplest gesture, such as a farmer tipping his hat to the PCs or offering them fresh apples as they wander by, does the trick.

Have an NPC solve a problem. Hapless NPCs are constantly looking toward the adventurers to solve their problems for them, but players are more inclined to respect an NPC who isn't useless. If a mystery has the party befuddled, an NPC might volunteer a helpful bit of advice that steers the party in the right direction. If the characters visit a town threatened by orcs, an NPC woodsman or scout might single-handedly capture an orc that the heroes can interrogate to find out where its fellow orcs are hiding. The PCs shouldn't have to solve all of the world's problems alone.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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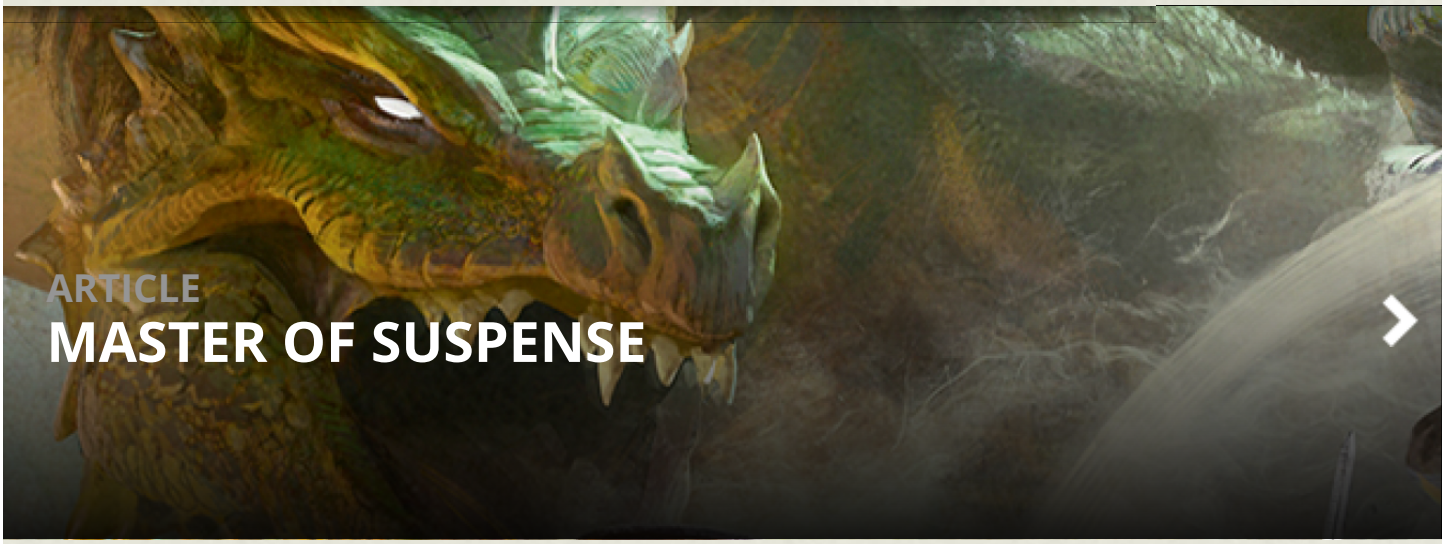
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS



ARTICLE

MASTER OF SUSPENSE

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragonscampaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT. The party's dead. No corpses or body parts means no Raise Dead rituals, begging the question of *what happens next?* Will the spirits of the slain adventurers somehow find their way back into the world? What kind of *deus ex machina* will the DM invoke to set everything right?

I have often said that my primary role behind the DM screen is to entertain my players, which includes keeping them in suspense. Suspense heightens anxiety and uncertainty, and one way to create suspense in a **D&D** game is to put characters in jeopardy and then cut away to something else, thus leaving players anxious. Take the Wednesday night group, which was all but obliterated in our penultimate game session. Instead of picking up where the campaign left off and answering the big question on their minds *Are the characters truly dead?* I went somewhere else entirely and kept the players in suspense for 20 minutes.

The game session began with me describing a weirdly bucolic scene clouds shaped like gnomes and devils drifting above autumnal trees, curled leaves raining down upon a garden filled with diabolical topiaries and brilliant flowers viewed through the parlor window of a rustic estate in the Feywild. Looking out the window is Xanthum Zail, the gnome bard (played by Curt Gould). He's sitting across from a styx devil advisor who's staring at a chessboard and contemplating his next move. There's a knock on the parlor door, foreshadowing the arrival of Xanthum's elderly tiefling manservant. Ambling behind him is a gnome-sized straw golem that's the

centerpiece of the Burning Gnome Festival, a seasonal event hosted by Xanthum in which the straw golem is set ablaze and unleashed in the gardens while giddy gnome children chase after it and beat out the flames with shovels. I'm particularly proud of this little bit of imagery because of the laughter it elicited from my players, and nothing's better than a laugh to disarm the audience before ratcheting up the suspense.

I chose to open the session with images of devils and burning gnomes for a reason: In the middle of the epic tier, Xanthum was separated from the party and trapped in the Nine Hells. During his absence, he managed to claw his way up the infernal ranks to become a Duke (he is epic level, after all). He tried to rejoin the party but was no longer welcome. His former adventuring companions tossed Xanthum off their ship, believing he was now an emissary of evil, and so he retired to his Feywild residence. Consequently, the gnome bard wasn't with the party in its final moments. (Curt's other character, Divin, took Xanthum's place and paid for it with his life.)

My plan was to use Xanthum as a point-of-view character to explain what had happened in the wake of the previous session's events. It presented Curt with a fun roleplaying opportunity and a chance to close the book on his surviving character. Meanwhile, the other players sat around the table, wondering whether their characters were truly dead and if they'd somehow get drawn into Xanthum's unfolding story. The suspense was finally shattered as Xanthum returned to Iomandra, made contact with a number of important NPCs (as well as Rodney Thompson's other surviving character, Nevin), and learned what the players already suspected: the party was really dead, and the campaign was truly coming to an end. Several months of in-world time had elapsed since the party's demise, and the world was in a much better state. The Black Curtain had fallen, there was peace among the Sea Kings of Iomandra, and old disputes were finally being laid to rest. Many beloved NPCs had moved on to bigger and better things, and Xanthum the great gnome bard took it upon himself to ensure the party's legacy would not be easily forgotten.

LESSONS LEARNED

You might think that the other players were unhappy with the attention lavished upon Xanthum, but let's be honest: It didn't take long for them to realize I was using the gnome as a plot device to show the results of their characters' sacrifice, and that justified their lack of participation in the Xanthum storyline. For suspense to work, you need to keep the players emotionally invested in the story; otherwise, suspense is quickly replaced with boredom.

With suspense, timing is everything. A second too short, and the audience isn't wound up enough. A second too long, and the audience's pent-up tension turns to exasperation. Film directors who specialize in taut thrillers will tell you that suspense

is created not in front of the camera but in the editing room, where bits of film can be added or removed to get the timing of a scene just right. These same directors will also tell you that music and sound are great contributors to suspense, but these aren't tools that most DMs can use to great effect, making *timing* even more important in a **D&D** game.

Suspense can't last forever, of course. Eventually, it needs to pop like a balloon so that the audience gets some well-deserved relief.

Once I was done with Xanthum and the world of Iomandra, all attention shifted to the Raven Queen's palace in the Shadowfell, where the spirits of the dead adventurers were gathered to witness the goddess of fate putting the final nail in Vecna's coffin. (The heroes sacrificed themselves to ensure the evil god's demise and deliver his soul into the Raven Queen's waiting arms.) Before releasing their spirits to the afterlife, the Raven Queen gave each character the chance to help decide the fates of those they'd left behind. Speaking for his goliath battlemind, Ravok, Andrew Finch urged the Raven Queen to let faith in the new gods flourish in a world of religious intolerance. Nacime Khemis, speaking for the warforged warden Fleet, asked that fate conspire to free his people from servitude. Divin, Curt Gould's dead cleric, asked the Raven Queen to salvage an old canoe that once belonged to the party (it was lost during the heroic tier) and let it transport some new hero on a great adventure. Deimos, Chris Youngs' tiefling sorcerer, declined the Raven Queen's offer to meddle in the fates of others, certain in his belief that people should rule their own destinies. That brought us, finally, to Rodney Thompson's character, a champion of the Raven Queen named Vargas, who'd spent the entire campaign struggling to find his place in the world, and finally ending up by his god's side. It was Vargas who uttered the campaign's final words, striking at the heart of what makes me love this game . . .

And with that, I now leave YOU in suspense.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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FEATURED ARTICLE

ARTICLE

MAKE IT BIG!

This regular column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

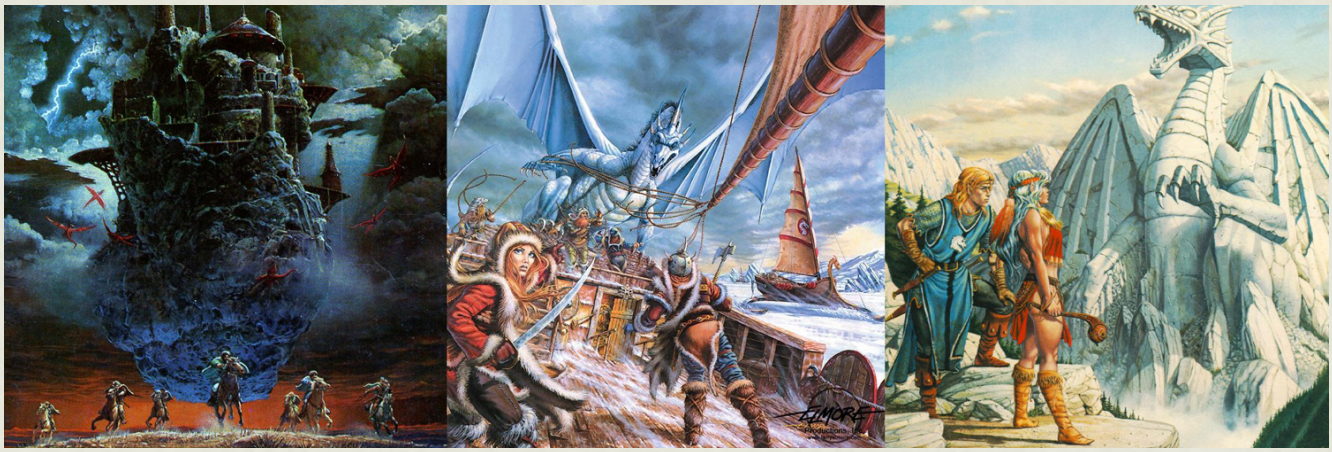
MONDAY NIGHT. An iron shark golem chews holes in the heroes' ship. A flying citadel races across the ocean atop a 1,000-foot-high waterspout. A villainous spymaster threatens to launch the halfling rogue out of a giant cannon. The party shaman traps himself in an *iron flask* after being devoured by a giant awakened crocodile. An illithid vessel under the party's control crashes into an evil warlock's rocket-ship observatory moments before blast-off. Throw in earth sleds, water chariots, and fire gliders (read: jet-packs), and . . . well, you probably have a better sense of what the Iomandra campaign is like, and less respect for me as a DM. But then, I never promised to deliver the perfect campaign just a memorable one.

A few months after I joined Wizards of the Coast, Monte Cook told me about a new **D&D** campaign designed to test some experimental rules. He offered me a seat at his game table, and once a week for three years we explored the world of Praemal (the lesser-known precursor to Monte's more famous Ptolus campaign) and playtested rules that would gradually evolve into what is currently referred to as "3rd Edition." The Praemal campaign ended spectacularly with the PCs crashing a moon into a planet. It sounds absurd, I know, but really it seemed like a good idea at the time.

The Praemal and Ptolus campaigns are distant memories. I don't remember the names of all the player characters or all of the villains we faced, just the really weird stuff and the really big stuff . . . like the time my elf rogue/wizard/fighter banished his dark elf nemesis to the sun's core. That doesn't happen every day.

When my long-time players wax nostalgic about *my* 3rd Edition campaign, it's the weird stuff and the over-the-top stuff that survives the test of time. The blimp-like soar whales and creepy-crawly centipede carriages, the city carved out of giant mushrooms, the myconids with the funny voices, and those crazy cartwheeling clowns that showed up for, like, 5 minutes! The players also remember big sky-battles and my treacherous gnome villain, Erellak Golgof, plunging thousands of feet to his death.

Campaigns don't survive the test of time by being timid. The **Dragonlance** campaign setting is a textbook example, with its larger-than-life locations, amazing villains, and epic storyline. As a DM, I feel driven to tell the biggest stories I can without breaking the campaign world's internal logic. The pressure's on me to push the limits of my special FX budget and deliver images and encounters that leave crater-sized impacts in my players' collective memories. When I look back on my 4th Edition campaign, I can point to a number of mega-awesome moments where nothing was held back. These are the moments I know my players will remember ten years from now.



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But let's forget about all the *whackadoo* stuff in my campaign . . . the iron shark, the rocket-ship observatory, the fire gliders, and so forth. When I aim to "make it big," I'm striving to ensure that my campaign has heroes doing more than just clearing out dungeons and slaughtering monsters. Don't get me wrong; I love a good dungeon crawl. But what happens in the dungeon usually stays in the dungeon. To really make an impact, the characters also need to butt heads with evil tyrants, face real dilemmas, and pull rabbits out of their hats when things are at their bleakest. The locations they explore need to be wondrous, majestic, magical places like something out of a **Dragonlance** painting or Guillermo del Toro's imagination. Shoot for the moon, I say! Go for broke, I say! Make it BIG!

LESSONS LEARNED

My advice to "make it BIG" comes with a really big caveat: Every campaign has its upper limits, beyond which it becomes a farce. I'm not suggesting that all campaigns would benefit from having warlock towers that can launch into orbit, giant blimp-whales, crashing moons, or Death Stars for that matter. I'm not suggesting that you abandon reason and mock the rules of good storytelling. Of course you need to make

choices that fit within the context of your specific campaign. "Make it BIG!" takes on an entirely different meaning if you're running a campaign that's modeled after feudal Japan, ancient Rome, or the Dark Ages. How you "make it big" in a low-magic setting is different from how you "make it big" in a high-magic one. Ultimately, a DM needs to define the limits. My advice boils down to this question:

What can I do to amaze my players without compromising the integrity of my campaign?

Or, put another way:

What are the biggest ideas I can think of that fit my campaign?

These are not always easy questions to answer, and believe me, I've missed the mark and crossed the line from time to time. In the Monday night campaign, I thought it would be fun to introduce an elder star-spawn that could alter reality on a global scale. At one point, I realized that I'd gone too far and twisted reality so much that the players couldn't keep track of what their characters knew, and I had to rein myself in and contrive a means to undo what I'd done using a time-traveling mercury dragon that "flattened out" wrinkles in reality with an enormous clocklike device called a Time Hammer. I sh*t you not.

A BIG idea could be anything: a plot twist, a striking bit of imagery, an audacious villain, a new monster, an army of monsters, a special "toy" or magical super-weapon for the heroes to play with . . . you name it. In a **D&D** campaign modeled after feudal Japan, is it too weird to have an evil samurai vampire with a god-slaying sword and a clockwork tiger controlled by a magical diamond? Would it be over-the-top to have an adventure that takes place in a floating palace inhabited by a green dragon empress and her shuriken-throwing kobold ninja assassins? Ultimately, that's for the DM to decide.

When you go for broke and pull out all the stops, is there not the risk of losing everything your integrity, your campaign's integrity, your players' interest and respect, your grasp on reality? Perhaps, but I wouldn't worry about it. In fact, it's been my experience that players enjoy watching the DM flex his or her creative muscles and stretch the campaign beyond safe tolerances once in a while. I wouldn't worry about jumping the shark. I'd worry more about a campaign that didn't dare to live large in the players' minds.

Until the next encounter!

Dungeon Master for Life,
Chris Perkins

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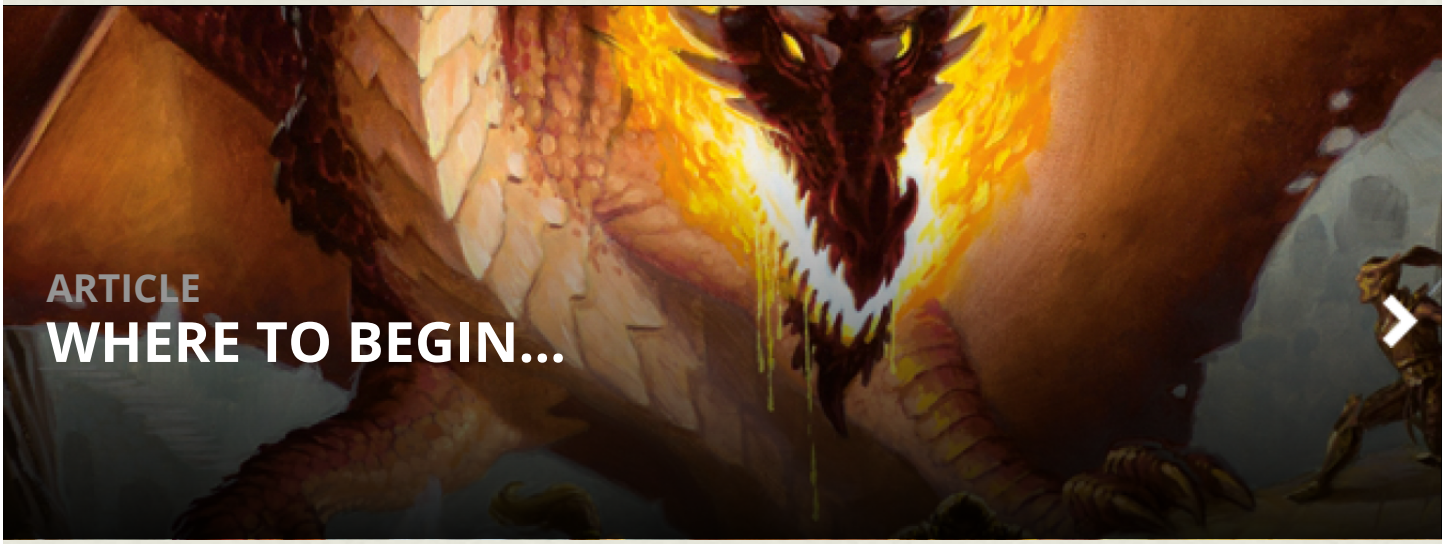

ARTICLE

WHERE TO BEGIN...

This column is for Dungeon Masters who like to build worlds and campaigns as much as I do. Here I share my experiences as a DM through the lens of Iomandra, my Dungeons & Dragons campaign world. Even though the campaign uses the 4th Edition rules, the topics covered here often transcend editions. Hopefully this series of articles will give you inspiration, ideas, and awesome new ways to menace your players in your home campaigns.

I don't create a D&D campaign for profit or broad consumption. I create it for myself and for a select, handpicked audience. Even more rewarding than the act of creation is the opportunity to watch my players discover the world and unravel its secrets. I like watching a campaign transform from one person's idea into a shared experience.

The campaigns I create are fairly well defined from the outset. For me, the creative process starts up to year in advance, with me thinking of striking images, dreaming of great conflicts, and deciding what makes the campaign different from the ones I've created before. I also spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about what the campaign will be called and conjuring up names that evoke the right mood.

Eventually, one big idea emerges as the frontrunner and crystallizes to form the "hook" of the campaign (also called its *key conceit*), around which everything else will be built. My 3rd Edition campaign, Arveniar, was built around the idea of a kingdom in the sky. My 4th Edition campaign, Iomandra, was built around a draconic empire scattered across islands on a vast sea. My D&D Next campaign, Valoreign, is about a chivalric kingdom transformed by a mysterious magical event.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

I begin by putting words to paper, in a fashion. The first and most important document that I create for my new campaign world is the "campaign bible." It's the document that tells the players the fundamentals and what character options are

available to them. I created campaign bibles for Arveniar and Iomandra, and I've created one for Valoreign as well. The campaign bible is written to spark the players' imaginations and help them make characters with strong ties to the world, and it's a great way to codify the essence of the setting and seed it with adventure hooks. It's also a great way to tell your players that you're serious and committed to the campaign's success.

Rather than *tell* you how I craft my campaign bibles, I thought it would be more fun to show you what I've done for Valoreign thus far:

VALOREIGN

This is the first time I've shared this document—even my players haven't seen it until now. Admittedly, it needs some work both in terms of content and presentation, and it could use a few pieces of pick-up art to catch the eye. However, it's a good beginning, and I like the overall organization. Feel free to use it as a model for your own campaign bibles. As you might expect, the Valoreign campaign bible will continue to evolve over the next few months, up to the point when I'm ready to schedule the first game session.

In my humble opinion, there's no better way to begin a campaign than to give your players a tantalizing first glimpse into the world. However, before I wrap up this column, let me give you one final piece of advice: If you're not sure how the players will react to your new campaign setting, hold off on the campaign bible until you've floated some of your ideas past them. Solicit their input, and think about working some of their ideas into the campaign before the writing begins. After all, it's their campaign world, too.

Until the next encounter!

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VALOREIGN

Valoreign is an island kingdom known for its chivalry and magic. Human knights and wizards of the Severian Empire invaded the island realm over a thousand years ago, wresting control from the indigenous tribes of dwarves, elves, and human berserkers. The kingdom has since established its supremacy and forged tenuous alliances with many of its former enemies, in particular the dwarf clans of the north. It has survived the collapse of the Severian Empire and the arrival of dragons and warlords eager to stake their claim on the rich island domain, not to mention threats from other survivors of the Severian Empire's demise, including its nearest political neighbor, the mainland kingdom of Nirvan.

The current ruler of Valoreign is His Royal Highness Thomas Starhewen, the Manticore King. King Thomas is 95 years old, and for years his longevity was attributed to the wizardry of the Council of Magi. The seven members of the Council—each one a powerful archmage of noble birth—serve the king as advisors and island defenders. The king also relies on three knightly orders to defend the realm and hold its enemies at bay: the Order of the Hearth, which defends the heavily populated lowlands to the south; the Order of the Flame, which defends the scarcely populated highlands to the north; and the Order of the Grave, which is comprised of dead knights who can, in times of need, be revived th ough the arcane art of necromancy.

King Thomas rules from Val stand, th academic and religious heart of the kingdom. The worship of God is prominent here, and the A chbishop of S Auvalon's Cathedral has great influence at court. Beyond the walls of Valorstand, the lowland are comprised f farms, forests, rustic towns, and backwater villages built on land bequeathed by kings to n ble landown rs and ligious abbeys. Sylvan forests are home to wood elves and other fey creatures that shun hum nity e ept wh n gob in uprisings demand a temporary alliance. By stark comparison, the highlands are a vast, un med fronti r where civilization has barely taken root and where dwarves and orcs wage open war. Dan erou beasts a o roam these cold, mountainous, god-forsaken lands. East of the main island of Engweald s the isla f I rlaan, annexed by Valoreign after the armies of Ronald Starhewen, the Gorgon King, slaughtered the b rserker chieftains, decimated their tribes, and subjugated the survivors. In his advanced age, King Thomas as neglected th b rserker tribes of Iyarlaan and allowed them to grow in strength and number, undoing much f his fath s wo k and causing great consternation at court.

DRAFT

A Brief Timeline

512: The Severian Empire invades the island of Engweald
520: The empire forges an alliance with the Skorinfain (the d arves of ngweald) gainst the orc hordes.
533: Imperial forces storm the island of Iyarlaan and face the native berserker tribes battle.
575: Imperial legions conquer Engweald and Iyarlaan, and the vassal kingdom of Va re n is born.
576: Kjerin Ravenstorm, the Wyvern King, is crowned the first ruler of Valoreign
825: The Severian Empire collapses, causing great turmoil. Valoreign is no lon r beholden to Empress Severia.
826: Empress Severia seeks asylum in the kingdom of Nirvan but is capture and executed.
888: Nirvan tries to politically annex Valoreign but fails. A military coup is likewise thwarted.
906: The berserker tribes of Iyarlaan oust their imperial overseers, ushering in "the Wild Years."
1081: When the House of Ravenstorm produces no worthy heir, the House of Starhewen claims the throne.
1082: Jocelyn Starhewen, the Griffon Queen, becomes the first sovereign queen of Valoreign.
1124: Queen Jocelyn's warships sink a Nirvanan naval flotilla transporting supplies to Iyarlaan.
1125: The queen staves off war by marrying Prince Leopold Marciveau of Nirvan, all of eleven years old.
1130: Nirvanan assassins poison Prince Leopold to foment war, but their plot is foiled with the aid of magic.
1259: A goblin uprising leads to the first formal alliance between Valoreign and the Engwealdar (wood elves).
1275: Valorstand hosts a diplomatic visit from the King of Nirvan, ushering in an era of peace and prosperity.
1280: Ronald Starhewen, the Gorgon King, wins the Battle of the Red Skies. Valoreign reclaims Iyarlaan.
1283: Following the death of his father, 18-year-old Thomas Starhewen is crowned the Manticore King.
1285: King Thomas sires the first of five children. Prince Theodore is declared heir to the throne.
1300: King Thomas divorces his first wife, Nora Brantham, and takes a much younger bride, Alice Ketteridge.
1302: Queen Alice and her only child die shortly after childbirth. Oddly, neither receives a funeral.
1307: The Winter Wars ignite as Valoreign allies with the Skorinfain dwarves against the orc hordes.
1311: King Thomas and his knights slay the white wyrm Ezenglaur at the Battle of Tarnstead.
1323: Tired of fighting dragons, King Thomas offers tributes to all the great wyrms of Valoreign.
1334: King Kristophe Marciveau of Nirvan marries Lady Evangeline Dumonde, thirty-five years his junior.
1360 (Present Year): A wave of arcane energy explodes across Valoreign (the Night of Wild Magic).

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The Night of Wild Magic

Less than a year prior to the start of the campaign, a blast of arcane energy exploded in the heart of Valoreign and washed across the island kingdom like a sparkling wave of green flame. (Green flame!) Many of the people, places, and things touched by the wave were magically transformed in seemingly random ways. Others were completely unaffected as the wave washed over them harmlessly.

The transformations range from curious and amusing to disturbing and outright malevolent. One farmer reported that his barn transformed into a giant wooden dragon that took to the skies and has never been seen since. An innkeeper's gossipy wife sprouted a second head that speaks only in the Sylvan tongue. The apples in a monastery orchard turned white and are rumored to possess astonishing magical properties. A boulder outside the village of Hobnock was reshaped into the likeness of a grinning face, even sprouting moss that resembles hair and sideburns, while at the same time all children in the village vanished without a trace. A noble lord woke up from his slumber without his ears, while his favorite mule was suddenly imbued with intelligence, the power of speech, and mastery of five languages.

Scholars surmise that the event originated in the Elder World, also known as the Feywild or the Faerie Realm, likely spilling into Valoreign through a fey crossing. At least, that seems the most likely explanation given the unpredictable nature of the magic and its apparent irreversibility. However, no one is certain where the eruption into the natural world actually occurred, or what might have caused it.

Some citizens would like nothin more than to see the Night of Wild Magic undone. Others are more inclined to leave well enough alone and ccep the good with the bad, particularly given the most astonishing transformation of all: that of King Thom s Starhewen. Before the Night of Wild Magic, the Manticore King was a rickety, time-addled, 95-y ar-old husk o a man. By morning, he was restored to his 17-year-old self, young in body yet wise in years

Campaign Rule: Wild Magi

At 1st level, unless you decide otherwis y ur charac r gains the Wild Magic feat. The feat is free and has no prerequisites other than your charac r must e been n Valoreign on the Night of Wild Magic.

The Wild Magic feat grants you one of the s ec raits or abilities described below (your choice, or if you feel daring, you can roll randomly). Abilities that uplicate spells are cast at your level, and no two characters in the party can have the same trait or ability. Here another cat h There are things in the campaign that profoundly affect those "touched" by wild magic. You wo 't kno what th are until they occur, and these "events" could prove detrimental to your character's wellbeing depend ng o the situation or circumstances. If you choose not to give your character the Wild Magic feat, your character l not be s c ptible to these occurrences.

Roll	Wild Magic Trait or Ability (choose one)
01–04	You can cast *detect magic* (as the spell) at will.
05–08	You can cast *feather fall* (as the spell; self only) at will.
09–12	You are never surprised.
13–16	You can cast *barkskin* (as the spell; self only) at will.
17–20	You can cast *animal friendship* (as the spell) at will.
21–24	You can cast *animal messenger* (as the spell) at will.
25–28	You can cast *telekinesis* (as the spell; objects only) at will.
29–32	You can cast *tree shape* (as the spell) once per day.
33–36	You can cast *disguise self* (as the spell) at will.
37–40	You can cast *read magic* (as the spell) at will.
41–44	You are immune to cold or fire (choose one).
45–48	You are immune to lightning and can cast *shocking grasp* (as the spell) at will.
49–52	You can cast *dimension door* (as the spell; self only) once per day.
53–56	You can cast *pass without trace* and *water walk* (as the spells; self only) at will.
57–60	You can cast *dispel magic* (as the spell) at will.
61–64	You can cast *freedom of movement* (as the spell; self only) at will.
65–68	You can cast *charm person* (as the spell) at will.
69–72	You can cast *spider climb* (as the spell) at will.
73–76	You can cast *knock* (as the spell) at will.
77–80	You can cast *identify* (as the spell) at will.
81–84	You can cast *jump* (as the spell) at will.
85–88	You can cast *speak with animals* (as the spell) at will.
89–92	You can cast *longstrider* (as the spell; self only) at will.
93–96	You can cast *invisibility* (as the spell; self only) at will.
97–00	You can cast *insect plague* (as the spell) once per day.

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The Elder World (The Feywild)

Scholars and priests usually refer to the Feywild as the "Elder World," a realm twisted by magic and riddled with mystery. Myths, legends, and fables about the Elder World abound, even among the dwarf clans of the north and the berserker clans of Iyarlaan, both of which have endured their fair share of "fey encounters." Creatures from the Feywild enter the natural world through fey crossings, most of which are notoriously difficult to detect because they exist only at certain times or under rare conditions (such as in the light of a full moon during the summer solstice).

Most folk who blunder into the Feywild never return, while those who claim to have ventured there and returned are utterly mad. The wood elves of Engweald and Iyarlaan have strong ties to the Feywild, but even they shun the Elder World and the madcap politics of the fey courts.

The After World (The Shadowfell)

As much as the Elder World exists, so too does the After World; like the Feywild, it is a place best avoided by mortals. The After World does not abide the living, which is why only the dead find peace there. Stories tell of a City of the Dead in the Shadowfell, ruled by a horrific figure called the Ghoul King, and of pale-faced, black-clad horsemen who venture from the city into the land of the living, emerging through shadow crossings to harvest souls on moonlit nights.

Knights who belong to the Or er of the Grave are thought to reside in the After World, until such time as necromantic rituals are used call them forth into service once more. The Shadowfell is also where the spirits of the deceased dwell for a ime before c ntinuing their journey to the afterlife. Often, spirits will escape this bleak realm to haunt th natural world a ghosts, wraiths, and other horrors.

The Severian Calenda

Although the Severian Empire fell to ru lo g ago, the kingdom of Valoreign continues to follow the Severian calendar, as do most of the civilized ations g wn fr m the same imperial root. The calendar has twelve months, each month comprised of four weeks, and eac week containing seven weekdays (Sun's Day, Moon's Day, Earth's Day, Wind's Day, Air's Day, Fire's Day, and Sta s Day).

Month	Seasonal Significance	Mont	Seasonal Significance
Demir	First month of SPRING	Vall	First month of AUTUMN
Middemir	Month of the Spring Equinox	M all	M nth of the Autumn Equinox
Enddemir	End of spring	En vall	End f autumn
Skalar	First month of SUMMER	O ost	First month of WINTER
Midskalar	Month of the Summer Solstice	Mido st	Month of he Winter Solstice
Endskalar	End of summer	Endorost	End of wint r

People of Valoreign

The population of Valoreign is mostly comprised of humans (70%), dwarves 0%), halflings (10%), and elves (5%), with other races (including half-elves and half-orcs) making up the remaining 5%. Here are notes and common names for each major race:

The Valish (Humans)

Most humans in Valoreign are descendants of the collapsed Severian Empire. Those who inhabit the island of Engweald are called the Valish, and they have traditional first and last names. Many also have middle names.

Male First Names: Alastair, Ambrose, Andrew, Avery, Barnaby, Bartholomew, David, Edward, Geoffrey, Hugh, Humphrey, John, Julian, Milton, Myles, Nathaniel, Oliver, Roger, Solomon, Thomas, Timothy, Wyatt, Zachary.

Female First Names: Agnes, Blanche, Bridget, Clemence, Dolores, Edith, Eleanor, Emma, Ethel, Florence, Isabel, Joyce, Margery, Marion, Mildred, Molly, Pricilla, Rose, Ruth, Susanna, Sybil, Ursula, Valorie, Winifred.

Surnames: Andrews, Ashenhurst, Barlow, Battle, Beadows, Berkhead, Blackwood, Blake, Bishop, Bloom, Blunt, Bright, Carpenter, Cartwell, Castledon, Collingford, Crane, Crook, Cunley, Dawnthorpe, Downer, Dragonwell, Dunfield, Elkhorn, Everett, Fitzgeoffrey, Fletcher, Francis, Fray, Gladdish, Goldworth, Gossingham, Grimmer, Hadley, Hale, Hammersfield, Hargreave, Hawkins, Humphrey, Hunter, Hyde, Ives, Jenkins, Jollybad, Keast, King, Kottlegrey, Lestrange, Leventhorpe, Langford, Lloyd, Mansfield, Merriwether, Mortimer, Motts, Moxley, Narbridge, Northam, Noyes, Olver, Pallcraft, Payne, Penhale, Polkinghorn, Pummel, Quail, Quillmaker, Ratley, Reeve, Ringer, Rosserford, Rowley, Russell, Sawford, Shivington, Silcox, Smythe, Snell, Stargrave, Stokes, Strangways, Teague, Tellam, Throckmorton, Thurman, Torrington, Trowbridge, Unger, Uxbridge, Vaughan, Vawdrey, Whitaker, White, Winkle, Wyndham, Yates, Yesterman.

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The Berserker Tribes (Humans)

The berserker tribes of Iyarlaan are primitive and uncivilized by Valish standards, but they have strong family ties and dwell in fortified strongholds ruled by powerful chieftains. They bury their dead under rocky cairns or set them ablaze on funeral barges. Worshipers of a pantheon of elemental spirits (including Cryonax, Imix, Ogrémoch, Olhydra, and Yan-C-Bin), they eschew traditional surnames in favor of tribal names.

Male First Names: Abbán, Alyan, Anyilyas, Anyir, Arassán, Awnruhan, Aymur, Ayumnawn, Baeth, Bairrion, Balvach, Bardán, Bawnrune, Bearach, Beyagh, Broc, Brónach, Calvach, Caven, Cawlyach, Cawnrid, Cillian, Conán, Daig, Dallán, Daltach, Dawray, Dazmunach, Diarmuid, Dulas, Eamon, Farchar, Fekeen, Ferrál, Finyain, Flannacán, Fwaylan, Fyunvar, Garván, Gilgawn, Gilyesh, Gobán, Gorman, Iardán, Ilyach, Irial, Jarlath, Krewer, Kyaran, Kyarull, Labhrás, Lachlán, Lazrain, Leyevawn, Lonán, Mansheen, Maolán, Malwir, Markán, Mawktal, Mayn, Mwirioch, Nahán, Nevawn, Niallán, Olchabar, Orán, Owin, Rewan, Riordán, Roartach, Ronán, Shachlán, Shulawn, Skarhawk, Skawnlar, Sowrán, Tallách, Teernach, Tiarlán, Torcán, Ulcán, Ullihir, Yuráth.

Female First Names: Ahyil, Anleyah, Awnyah, Awvrah, Blawheen, Bree, Cathán, Davnát, Dawnacha, Dawrinyeh, Deirdre, Dervila, Eadan, Eniv, Evgrenyah, Evneyah, Fachna, Fawn, Fennore, Fiachra, Fionnula, Fyelm, Gorvah, Grayán, Ida, Kéyin, Kléawna, Kwaylin, Kyarah, Leesha, Liadán, Lweeshach, Lyuwen, Maelissa, Maeve, Marga, Miren, Morin, Mornyah, Muriel, Murwen, Narvila, Neesha, Nyach, Orla, Reeyawn, Ronnat, Seerla, Shannon, Shay, Shuvawn, Sloane, Sorcha, Suanach, Talán, Taltyah, Tilyach, Tuathla, Tyadee, Ulach, Uwinyen.

Tribes: Blood Hawk tribe, Crimson Mist tribe, Flaming Bull tribe, Fire Strider tribe, Great Worm tribe, Land Shark tribe, Living Cairn tribe, Thunder Bird tribe, Water Snake tribe, Winter Wolf tribe.

The Skorinfain (Dwa ves)

Skorin was the First Ki of the dwarve and his fossilized remains are revered by the dwarves of Valoreign, who refer to themselves s the "sons a d daug ers of Skorin," or *Skorinfain*. Hill dwarves are less reclusive than their mountain-dwelling kin but th e is no animo ity between the hill clans and the mountain clans. A dwarf's surname is also his or her clan name.

Male First Names: Arn, Barin, Dolm n, Fa grik, Fyo n, Gluto, Grulf, Haxan, Holst, Illvar, Jokum, Krog, Krune, Kvalgar, Lofgren, Ludvig, Nylan, Ra gvald, Ste ger S ensoren, Tarl, Wolvar, Yospur.

Female First Names: Bjerke, Dreylan, Falk Frunda, Gorana, Grayka, Halskir, Hammelmar, Helvig, Hjork, Lykke, Nessa, Ringylrund, Rosenklau, Syldi, V nnim, Yilsi, Yu ka Zelga.

Surnames: Axeberg, Barrelmead, Copper ein, Cryst eard Dragongrind, Dwerryhouse, Emberstoke, Evergulp, Ferrizalt, Grottmund, Hammermain, Ir sho Mith alvein, Osterchasm, Rockmantle, Shadowholm, Tarndark, Thunderharm, Tumblecask, Understrom, Vorn Z nkenlande

The Hillfolk and the Riverfolk (Halflings)

Many halflings live quiet, sedentary lives in hollowed-out hills hile o hers are pr ne to wanderlust and use rafts to navigate the rivers of Valoreign (where they are less l kely to be threatened y predators). Hillfolk are sometimes called Stouts, while the Riverfolk are also known as Tallfellows.

Male First Names: Badger, Bandit, Banzai, Carrot, Charley, Chipper, Corky, Crick t, Dod er, Early, Heron, Huck, Jay, Jester, Louie, Lucky, Moe, Ozzy, Pennywise, Robber, Seymour, Skip, Sk ar, Smedley, Squirt, William.

Female First Names: Blueberry, Celery, Claire, Cookie, Daisy, Minnow, No les, Peaches, Peanut, Pepper, Petunia, Punkin, Sadie, Sunny, Wendy, Whitney, Willow, Zoey.

Surnames: Daggerthwart, Fatpurse, Featherpluck, Fondslinger, Foolspride, Hallowhill, Hawksprey, Honeygrab, Hydenhill, Littlegrift, Meanderstride, Nevercaught, Noosewary, Poundfoolish, Puddleskiff, Rattlekey, Riverdance, Rockhucker, Roundhill, Shallowpool, Tricker, Trufflestuff, Wanderfoot, Whisperhill, Wylde.

The Engwealdar, the Iyarlandar, and the Sylvandar (Elves)

The reclusive wood elves of Valoreign are called the Engwealdar if they inhabit the misty forests of Engweald or the Iyarlandar if they hail from the dark forests of Iyarlaan. Wood elf havens are ruled by princes and princesses, but there is no singular king or queen to unify them. The mysterious high elves are called the Sylvandar, and they are refugees from the Elder World. Few in number, the Sylvandar lurk among their wood elf cousins and are rarely seen. Elves do not have surnames; however, they are proud of where they live and refer to their homes in their names, as in "Erannon of Emerald Glade" and "Nimmeth of Astramordan."

Male First Names: Aravoth, Arthon, Arvellas, Athelon, Balan, Balhiramar, Balthoron, Canyalas, Diron, Erannon, Eruvarne, Filverion, Firavaryar, Ganalan, Harmenion, Hilneth, Iomar, Larasarne, Lovain, Maingalad, Melethir, Nermion, Pellavan, Senevast, Tarthagol, Valisain.

Female First Names: Alonnen, Althirn, Anvanya, Dagor, Eredaith, Eruanna, Firyan, Gwenmirith, Haradi, Lenaren, Morisira, Myree, Nildë, Nimmeth, Rainion, Sennemir, Shalmorgan, Sirva, Torduin, Valaina, Varalia.

Home Names: Astramordan, Astravelios, the Circle of Ashes, the Emerald Cradle, the Green March, Kvalagost, Misthaven, Summerdown, Thornhenge, Val Andamar, Val Ressarin, the Weird Glade, Winterbane, Woodcrown.

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Important Figures

The following figures play prominent supporting roles or significant peripheral roles in the campaign:

His Royal Highness Thomas Starhewen (The Manticore King): King Thomas has ruled Valoreign for 83 years, the longest reign in the kingdom's history. He is a man of contradictions: bright yet reckless, jovial yet temperamental, passionate yet self-centered, God-fearing yet unbound to God. The Night of Wild Magic reinforced these contradictions by reverting King Thomas to his 17-year-old self, though he retains 95 years of memories and experiences. King Thomas is presently unmarried.

The Royal Heirs: King Thomas has five children (Theodore, Josie, Percival, Miranda, and Brantley), all fruits of his first marriage to the late Lady Nora Brantham, whom Thomas divorced sixty years ago. His Majesty's five children are in their sixties and seventies, and all have children and grandchildren of their own. For years, King Thomas used of *potions of longevity* to prolong his life, and his recent transformation during the Night of Wild Magic pretty well ensures that—barring unfortunate happenstance—he will outlive all five of his children.

Archbishop Hyustus Valentine (High Priest of St. Auvalon's Cathedral): The archbishop is a longtime advisor of the king and the head of the Church of God in Valoreign. He also oversees the monasteries and abbeys raised by the king to foster religio s obeisance and goodwill throughout the land. The archbishop is a cautious, quiet man who is fond of quoting St. uvalon. One of his favorite quotes is, "There is no excuse for war."

Council of Magi: Seven a hmages com ise the Council of Magi, which advises the king and defends the realm. Few can challenge the p wer of one archmage, let alone all seven. When summoned by the king, they gather in a tower of the royal palace alled the M cery, w ich is protected by all manner of magical wards. The seven current council members ar Llew yn Dra onsta f Magnus Filgray, Millicent Hawksworth, Elliot Lynch, Corwin Strome, Alicia Thistledown, and Jacqueli Vicard. No e claim any hand in the events surrounding the Night of Wild Magic, although many find such aims ard to b ieve.

Sir Douglas Tynebridge (Retired Royal Ma er-at-Arms): The king's closest friend and former hunting companion is also the retired Royal Master-a Arms. It is beli d that King Thomas holds Sir Douglas in higher regard than any other subject. It is also wide known that Sir D uglas is the only living soul at court allowed to call the king "Tommy" to his face. Now in his eigh es, S r Dou as still trains every morning, occasionally teaching the current Royal Master-at-Arms (his swarthy g andson, Lewi Tynebridge) a thing or two.

Sir Everley Falkonmore (Duke of Warfield): Duke Ever y, a kni t-comma der of Valoreign, leads the Order of the Hearth. He also presides over the provincial lands o War eld, hich his father earned after helping the king to slay the dragon Ezenglaur at the Battle of Tarnstead. S r Everley sides at c urt with his mistress for most of the year, returning to his estates only when the mood to see his wife strikes h

Abbán the Horrible (Warchief of the Living Cairn Tribe): Arguably the most p werful and dangerous warrior-chieftain of Iyarlaan, Abbán was hideously transformed by the Night Wild Magic. The druids of his tribe claim it was a gift from Ogrémoch, the elemental spirit of earth, but ev n they are horrified by the acts committed by Abbán against the other berserker tribes, in particular the devouring of their children.

His Royal Highness Kristophe Marciveau (King of Nirvan): Kristophe was born one year after the coronation of King Thomas of Valoreign. Now 76 years old and barely able to walk, he is nearing the end of his reign as sovereign of Nirvan. For many years, Kristophe was Thomas's bitter (and younger) rival, and word of King Thomas's recent transformation into a young man does not sit well with Kristophe, who longs to discover how the Night of Wild Magic came to pass.

Her Royal Majesty Evangeline Marciveau (Queen of Nirvan): Lady Evangeline Dumonde married the King of Nirvan at the tender age of 15. Now 41 and still a specimen of towering beauty, she rules Nirvan by her husband's side. Though Kristophe can no longer satisfy her womanly needs, her love for him has never tarnished. Unfortunately, the king and queen have no living heirs (having lost their children to sickness, war, and misfortune), and thus the Marciveau dynasty is at risk of coming to an end.

Her Royal Highness Vyorna Mithralvein (Dwarf Queen of Skorinholm): A proud descendant of Skorin, the First King of the dwarves, the venerable Queen Vyorna is attended by the Graybeard Council, made up of elders from the various dwarf clans. Vyorna has never agreed to a meeting with King Thomas of Valoreign, nor has she ever seen the sun. However, ties between her people and the humans of Valoreign have never been stronger.

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Dragons of Valoreign

The advance of civilization throughout the mainland realms of the Severian Empire drove many dragons to the outer fringes of the known world. A few settled on the islands of Engweald and Iyarlaan, and they fought each other for territory while enslaving the hapless indigenous folk (humans, orcs, dwarves, goblins, elves, you name it). Eventually, the Severian Empire set its mind to conquering these remote islands, and the dragons that were not slain by Severian swords and magic were driven back to their cavernous lairs. Every few years, a dragon would emerge from its lair to challenge its neighbors and stake a claim. The last dragon to die on Valoreign was the great white wyrm Ezenglaur, whose death in Tarnstead (well south of the dragon's frigid lair in the Sundown Mountains) marked the end of the Winter Wars.

The kings of Valoreign have always lived with dragons, which are rightly feared and respected. However, King Thomas was the first sovereign lord to realize that slaying dragons is hard and costly, and thus he sought a peaceful coexistence. Many at court thought the king mad for pursuing such a treaty, but the majority of the Council of Magi believed that dragons could be bribed into helping defend the realm against mainland threats. It took years for representatives of the king to treat with the dragons, but all were promised generous tributes in exchange for their allegiance. These tributes are paid annually, and the citizens of Valoreign carry the burden of paying taxes not only to fill the king's exchequer but also to "plump up" the dragons' hoards.

The Council of Magi keeps a watchful eye on the dragons of Valoreign, through magic and spies. Since dragons are prone to hibernate for years o end, it's not a particularly taxing endeavor. However, once in a red moon a new dragon will rear its ugly h d and catch the archmages by surprise.

Some of the most notorio and feared dragons of Valoreign include the following.

Arkynaster: The fable Red Dragon of R ddle Peaks is so old that none but the king's emissaries have seen it in this lifetime. Its lair is fill d with wing d kobol that flutter around nervously like bats and collect the treasure delivered to the dragon's do rstep

Cryovain and Dreadfrost: Believed t be th offsprin of Ezenglaur, the White Wyrm, these cruel siblings live among the orcs and giants in the sn wcapped ndo n Mountains. One or the other is occasionally sighted flying high over the mountain cluster known a Dwarf Crown.

Harrowfel: Once mated to Venomeer, the "G een Que hired adventurers to kill her mate shortly after giving birth and sneaking off with her clutch of wyrmli gs. Sh has t ken up residence near the Emerald Cradle, a sylvan woodland in the Duchy of Brightmeadows.

Immoldroth: The offspring of Arkynaster slaughtered he ibling nd claimed their hoards as her own, but she lacks the strength and will to challenge her father. She lairs in a abandoned dwarven fortress where the Riddle Peaks meet the Sundown Mountains.

Lyursigul: Rangers in Gorgonhold refer to her as "Black Beauty," although this mold enc sted black dragon of the Shadowcrowns is anything but beautiful. The goblins enslaved by her carry sh elds bearing her skull-like visage, and they call her Skullface, the Dread Mate of Maglubiyet.

Malastrom: The "Storm Dragon of Norn" is a temperamental blue wyrm that lives in a crumbling stone lighthouse on the northern cape, overlooking the wrecks of ships that were dashed upon the rocks. Harpies sing to her constantly, requiring the king's emissaries to fill their ears with wax when treating with the dragon.

Shiver: This female white dragon lives in the northern mountains of Iyarlaan amid the remains of a berserker stronghold that she ravaged long ago. Her treasure is kept in an ice-covered lodge, the interior of which is "plastered" with frozen corpses. The Winter Wolf tribe believes she's possessed by the spirit of Cryonax.

Sinister: This black wyrm haunts the Drackmire, a fetid swamp that dominates a long, finger-shaped peninsula in northeastern corner of the Ducky of Warfield. The lizardfolk that inhabit the Drackmire are vile, wicked creatures that worship Sinister as a god.

Venomeer: This green dragon was rumored to have died over a hundred years ago, killed by adventurers during the reign of Ronald Starhewen, the Gorgon King. However, the wood elves of Engweald believe the scheming dragon is very much alive, though it receives no tribute.

Voltaran: Dubbed "Big Blue" by the fisherfolk of Brightmeadows, Voltaran has taken a shine to the islands off the southern cape of Engweald and pretty much devoured everything that once lived there. He occasionally "beaches" on the south shore, to bask in the sun after eating a killer whale or two.

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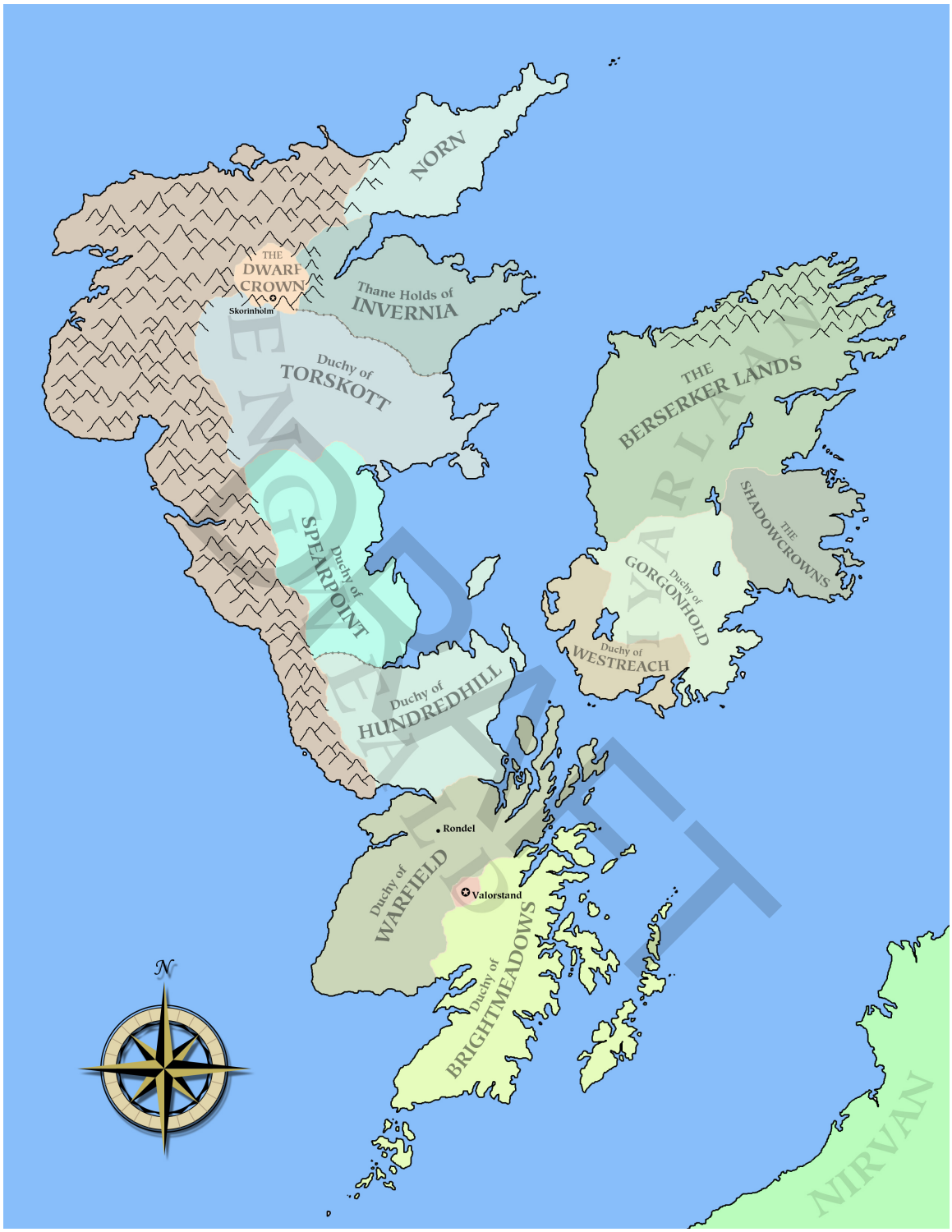

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The Valoreign campaign is inspired by Arthurian legends and medieval England. Rather than create an original map, I decided to take a map of the United Kingdom and rotate it 180 degrees, creating something that is familiar yet disconcerting. Only after doing so did I realize that Valoreign has a very obvious "V" shape, which is nice.*

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Important Places and Facts

Most of the campaign unfolds on the two largest islands of Valoreign: Engweald and Iyarlaan.

Engweald (The Western Isle)

The kingdom of Valoreign is comprised of many islands, the largest of which is Engweald. The island has cold mountains, rugged hills, and chilly moors to the north. As one travels south, the land becomes more fertile, giving way to fog-shrouded forests, misty meadows, and rain-drenched farmland.

Duchy of Brightmeadows: The tracts of farmland and forest that lie east and south of the capital comprise this duchy, which is overseen by an attentive and beloved Knight of the Hearth named Andrew Hullgrave. Hullgrave's land also surrounds a number of smaller counties and earldoms presided over by noble landowners. Brightmeadows is also home to Jacqueline Vicard of the Council of Magi.

Duchy of Hundredhill: Often abbreviated as "Dredhill," this duchy is aptly named, for the land throughout rises and falls, forming a seemingly endless range of wooded hills and fog-shrouded valleys. Many of the hilltops are dotted with villages as well as stone fortresses that guard against monstrous incursions from the northwest. The Duke of Dredhill is Sylvester Umbridge of the Order of the Hearth, known to his fellow knights as "Sir Sly" and "Lord Trollbane." Hundredhill is also home to Magnus Filgray of the Council of Magi.

Duchy of Spearpoint: Countless battles against orcs and giants have waged throughout this sparsely wooded hinterland, which is overseen by eely Knight of the Flame named Sir Bluto Henris, whose hatred of orckind knows no bounds. Spearpoint also h me to Millicent Hawksworth of the Council of Magi. The southern border of Spearpoint has a fortified wall stretch ng across it. Built by humans and dwarves to protect southern Engweald, it's defended b th by Sir Blut s knights as well as Knights of the Hearth from Hundredhill.

Duchy of Torskott: his cold, untam d hinterland has a few scattered villages and quarries far removed from the watchful eye of the kin but tend d to wi h a l due diligence by Duchess Catherine Mansfield and her fellow Knights of the Flame. The vill Orc's H ad has particular strategic importance, since it watches over the mountainous domains of the orc and gi t ings. Orc Head is also home to the wizard Corwin Strome of the Council of Magi. He and Dame Cather e have n unse led past.

Duchy of Warfield: This fertile lands north an est of Valorstand is dotted with villages and abbeys that swear fealty to the Manticore King. Duke Ever y Falkonmore presides over the land in the king's name, but leaves its protection to the Knights of the He th who serv und r him. The duke's holdings also surround a number of smaller counties and earldoms presided r by no le landowners. Warfield is also home to Elliot Lynch of the Council of Magi.

Dwarf Crown, The: This tight cluster of mountains in n hern Valo n so resembles a crown that it well deserves its name. Beneath the Dwarf Crown, far below the surface l es the ity-kingdom of Skorinholm.

Norn: The storm-ravaged northern peninsula of Engwe ld is a d inhospit ble place.

Skorinholm (dwarven city-kingdom): Population 7,500. T e ance ral home of Skorin, the First King of the dwarves, has grown over the centuries into a sprawling underground labyrinth, the primary entrance to which is a heavily fortified (and oft-besieged) mountainside fortress on the surface called Sk n's Gate, which bears the scars of many battles against orcs and giants. The reigning king of the dwarves actua ly a queen: the indomitable and intractable Vyorna Mithralvein.

Thane Holds of Invernia: Surface-dwelling hill dwarves call this rugged, i domain home. Their forges and dark domiciles are chiseled out of hillsides, and their domain is separated from the Duchy of Torskott by a mighty granite wall that stretches from the Dwarf Crown to the eastern shore. Invernia has no ruler, per se; rather, the land is divided among greedy dwarf thanes with blood-ties to the mightiest clans of Skorinholm.

Valorstand (capital city): Population 25,000. A gray wall topped with iron battlements, guardhouses, and dragon-shaped gargoyles surrounds the great city on the hill, upon which is perched the royal keep of Dragonroost, the Mancery (the tower of the Council of Magi), and St. Auvalon's Cathedral. Outside the city is the Wyvern's Tail, a winding river with sprawling farmland on both sides of it.

Iyarlaan (The Eastern Isle)

The large island east of Engweald is a verdant paradise nestled between wooded hills. Although much of the land is under the king's control, vast tracts of wilderness are home to the wild, untamed berserker tribes.

Berserker Lands, The: The berserker tribes call this verdant expanse home, and the rolling hills and timeworn mountains are dotted with their primitive strongholds and villages. Meanwhile, Valish knights astride hippogriffs monitor the Iyarish strongholds from the clouds, with strict orders from the Duchess of Gorgonhold not to anger the berserkers or stir up conflict. For now, the berserker tribes are content to let their enemies watch from the skies while they sharpen their weapons, strengthen their defenses, and wait for their warrior-chieftains to lead them once more into battle against the knights and wizards of Valoreign. The warrior-chieftains are always the strongest members of their respective tribes, which number anywhere from 200 to 2,000. The berserkers, like their age-old enemies, are also dealing with the aftermath of the Night of Wild Magic,

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which imbued many of them with strange abilities and ghastly deformities. Most of the tribal druids agree that the "Storm of Fire" was sent by Imix, the Great Elemental Flame, to reward the strong and punish the weak.

Duchy of Gorgonhold: This duchy was formed in 1280 after the Gorgon King's victory over the indigenous berserker tribes in the Battle of the Red Skies. Protecting the farms and foundling villages of this realm is the Duchess of Gorgonhold, Dame Anne Dunwarren, and the knight cavaliers of Order of the Hearth. Gorgonhold is also home to Llewellyn Dragonstaff of the Council of Magi.

Duchy of Westreach: The king's foothold in Iyarlaan is a rich domain populated by an adventurous breed of settlers from Engweald, whose interests and holdings are tended to by a formidable Knight of the Hearth named Duke Thomas Thistledown and his eldritch knights, all of them wealthy earls with coastal estates. Westreach is also home to the duke's third wife, Alicia Thistledown, the youngest member of the Council of Magi.

Shadowcrowns, The: This primeval forest, the largest in all of Valoreign, is home to the Iyarlandar wood elves, as well as treants, dryads, satyrs, druids, and ancient supernatural monsters. Berserker tribesfolk come here to hunt as part of their rites of passage, but otherwise the domain is largely avoided. Rangers from the Duchy of Gorgonhold also come here to treat with the wood elves and test their mettle.

Character Origins

You character can come from anywhere within the world. If you're looking for guidance, here are some likely points of origin based on race and class.

Race Origins

All races are widespread throughout Valoreign, meaning, for example, that you can play a human who grew up in the dwarven Thane Holds of Invernia or a dwarf who was raised in the capital of Valorstand. Here are some typical points of origin for the different races

Dwarf, Hill: You grew up on the cold, wintry Thane Holds of Invernia, protected in your youth by a great stone wall the separates the Thane Holds from the lands to the south. Eventually you decided to leave the safety of home and hearth and strike out into the larger world. Conversely, you may have grown up in one of the human duchies east of the mountains, where wood is plentiful and human friendship common.

Dwarf, Mountain: As a "son" or "daughter" of Skorin, the First King of the dwarves, you spent most of your life underground in the dwarven city of Skorholm until the call of adventure brought you to the surface, where the dwarves have been waging constant war against the orcs and giants of the Sundown Mountains.

Elf, High: You left the Elder World (the Feywild) voluntarily to live among mortals and escape the madness of the fey courts, finding a home among the wood elves or wandering the land in search of arcane lore. The Night of Wild Magic wrought a terrible transformation upon Valoreign, and you might seek to further understand or undo what has occurred.

Elf, Wood: You grew up in the forests of Engweald or Iyarlaan, but unlike your reclusive kin, you wish to experience more of the world and kill time with other races. Maybe you feel it's high time the elves came out of hiding and took their place as one of the proud peoples of Valoreign, or, if you are a prince or princess, maybe you seek to show your people that you are worthy enough to be their sovereign ruler.

Half-Elf: You are a rare breed, indeed. Elves so rarely interbreed with humans that your presence is enough to raise eyebrows and foment whispered speculation on the circumstances of your origin. You may be the offspring of diplomats residing in Valorstand, the kingdom's capital, or the product of an elf wood-maiden who chanced upon a rakish human ranger in the wild.

Half-Orc: Half-orcs are the product of forced breeding with humans, goblinoids, and dwarves primarily. Turns out, orcs will mate with just about anything. As orcs are well and truly despised throughout Valoreign, it's better to claim that you were deformed by the Night of Wild Magic than to admit your true parentage. If you were not reared by savage orcs, you were probably raised by humans or dwarves in northern Engweald.

Halfling, Stout: You hail from a hill-village in the Duchy of Brightmeadows or Warfield, and leaving the pastoral comfort of your home is a big step for such a small person. While you might be accustomed to visiting the capital and treating with humans, dwarves, and elves, it takes a courageous stout to resist the call of home.

Halfling, Tallfellow: Your family plies the rivers of Valoreign, and in your short life you've seen many wondrous things and met many peculiar folks. Leaving the river's edge to explore the land beyond is not such a big step, for as you know, it is the only way to find new rivers!

Human: The humans of the northern duchies of Engweald (Spearpoint and Torskott) are hardy folk accustomed to cold, damp weather and simple rural life. The humans of the southern duchies (Hundredhill, Warfield, and Brightmeadows) are peasants, farmers, artisans, merchants, traders, and nobles living in the cradle of chivalry and magic, sheltered against the perils of the world. The humans of southern Iyarlaan are bold frontier-folk, willing to tolerate their angry neighbors in search of adventure, prosperity, and autonomy. The proud berserkers of northern Iyarlaan crave freedom and battle, calling upon elemental spirits to fuel their never-ending thirst for blood. Some berserkers, upon realizing that the spirits they serve are evil and corrupt, turn their anger on the spirits in the hopes of freeing their people.

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Class Origins

When creating an origin based on your class, consider the following.

Barbarians: Commonly found in the northern reaches of Engweald and Iyarlaan, barbarians are accustomed to survival in harsh climes with little or no contact with civilization. King Thomas relies on the barbarians of northern Engweald to keep the orcs and giants of the Sundown Mountains at bay, while the berserker tribes of Iyarlaan seek to oust their island's Valish invaders and worship evil elemental spirits. It's uncommon but not unheard of to encounter a barbarian in southern Engweald; in ages past, barbarians were used as mercenaries to fend off invading forces from mainland nations such as Nirvan, and a few settled in remote corners of the southern reaches, including the islands east of Brightmeadows.

Cleric: The Severian Empire propagated a monotheistic religion based on faith in God, the Father of All, a divine humanoid figure believed to have created all humanoid life from the elements of the world. That religion is alive and thriving in the remnants of the empire, including the kingdom of Valoreign. The Father of All has many manifestations—the Lifegiver, the Warbringer, and many others. Some clerics choose to devote their faith to a particular manifestation, while others embrace all manifestations. The center of religion in Valoreign in St. Auvalon's Cathedral in the capital of Valorstand, although most clerics hail from the kingdom's many churches and monasteries, all of which are named after pilgrim saints who followed St. Auvalon to Engweald and founded religious worship in Valoreign. With threats all around, the faith and healing of clerics are in great demand.

Druid: The druids were practicing "natural magic" on Engweald and Iyarlaan long before the Severian Empire arrived. They are descendants of h indigenous peoples—the human berserker tribes, the Skorinfain dwarven clans, and the Engwealdar an Iyarlan ar wood elf nations. Today, they are considered pagan snake-handlers and hedge wizards who stu y the stars, me the elements, and practice uncivilized magic, but powerful wizards (including the Council o Magi) respect t eir power and right to honor their traditions. Druids keep a low profile but are found througho Valoreign, liv ng on the fringes of every culture, taming the beasts and elements that would threaten their home and res ing ba anc in times of great chaos and upheaval.

Fighter: Fighters of common irth are e soldier and militia of the realm, while those born with noble blood are the knights and cavaliers. The adve ur g fighter may have aspired to become one or the other, but chose the path of an adventurer instead. Th y are w y warr rs and proud defenders, using their courage and puissant skill at arms to quell monstrous threats.

Monk: Monasteries and abbeys throughou Valoreign give ri e to highly trained, God-fearing monks who are sent abroad to seek out lost lore, expand thei libraries, a ans er some "higher calling." Because of their neutral disposition and mental discipline, monks ar so calle upon from time to time to serve as peacekeepers, negotiators, and ambassadors in farflung plac . Many monks living in Valoreign were actually born in foreign countries, having only reached the island k gdom afte a l ng pilgrimage.

Paladin: Paladins are noble warriors (noble in spirit if n t in blo d) with a unflinching love of God and country. They pledge allegiance to the church and are inv sted w h power and itle by the king and by the archbishop of St. Auvalon's Cathedral. Young paladins are ofte assigne to protec monasteries, abbeys, and villages beset by evil. Others are sent on pilgrimages to bring the faith in God to place where others fear to tread. A few find kinship and strength in the ranks of the Order of the Hearth or the O d r of the Flame, where their charisma and healing ability make them welcome additions as knights of the ealm.

Ranger: Rangers are well-respected citizens of the kingdom, charged with p tecting civilization from the wilderness and vice versa. Many rangers are wealthy nobles with a taste for he freedom of the outdoors and large parcels of land on which to hunt game. Others are basically homeless, simple folk who live in the woods and hills, helping those in need. Kings have been known to employ rangers as wilderness assassins, hunting down and slaying troublesome orc leaders, berserker chieftains, and monsters.

Rogue: Rogues tend to congregate in heavily populated areas, and there is no place more heavily populated—and rife with intrigue and opportunity—than the capital city of Valorstand. That's where the action is. However, a rogue looking to "make it big" needs to strike it rich, and the best way to do that is to steal a dragon's hoard or plunder the ruins of some half-forgotten dungeon or ruin. Rogue gangs are common, and the bigger ones have such colorful names as the Threefinger Gang (so named because members must cut off their third fingers to join), the Mock Royals (whose members mock the nobility by calling themselves "Lords" and "Ladies," "Sirs" and "Dames"), and the Underlords (who run a black market out of the sewers of Valorstand).

Wizard: Magecraft is a common practice in Valoreign, and wizards command respect. Most wizards aspire to sit on the Council of Magi, and such ambitions create fierce competition between them. A wizard's career has modest beginnings, with one serving as apprentice to another until such time as the pupil rivals the master and seeks out a more powerful master to learn from. A few outsiders eschew apprenticeships and are self-taught, but they lack the references and the reputation to sit on the council. However, power is often its own reward. High elf wizards have little interest in the council; they're more interested in lost lore and magical discovery. Dwarf wizards hone the magic for battle against orcs, trolls, and giants, and with victory and age comes the opportunity to join the Graybeard Assembly in Skorinfain or strike it rich in Valorstand.

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Noble Blood

Human, dwarven, and elven societies have class structures that include both commoners and nobility. When creating a character, you may choose to have noble blood flowing through your veins. This comes with certain advantages. Potential disadvantages might also arise as the campaign unfolds.

Campaign Rule: Noble Blood

If you are a human, dwarf, elf, or half-elf, you may be of noble birth. If noble blood courses through your veins, you may select a title for yourself from the choices listed below. A half-elf character may choose from the human or elf options.

Human Title	Notes
Starhewen heir	As a Starhewen heir, you are part of the royal bloodline. You can have up to four retainers, all noncombatants, and a grandparent who is the one of King Thomas's five children.
Ravenstorm heir	As a Ravenstorm heir, you have the blood of the Ravenstorm family and a legitimate (if remote) claim to the throne. You are held in contempt by the Starhewen line, however.
Noble heir	You stand to inherit the title and holdings of an earl, count, or countess who governs a 10-mile-square parcel of land in one of the king's duchies.

Dwarf Title	Notes
Mithralvein heir	As a Mit ralvein heir you are part of the royal bloodline. You can have up to three retainers, all no combatants, an a grandparent who is the one of Queen Vjorna's many children.
Thane	You a e a dwarven t ane of Invernia, traveling abroad. You may issue commands to any membe f your n and xpe your orders to be followed.

Elf Title	Notes
Prince/princess	You have a royal loodline d mi ht one day unite the elven princedoms as king or queen. You can have up to five ret ners, all noncombatants.

Elven Firearms

The elves of Valoreign hunted with bows for ages, and man f them s l d However, the Sylvandar (high elves) have created new weapons that use magical blast powder to opel ro nd projectiles, specifically iron or silver bullets. These devices are still new to the world, an few fo ks Valoreign have seen them in action.

Campaign Rule: Elven Firearms

If you are a wood elf, a high elf, or a half-elf raised among elves, you may acquire eith r a lintlock pistol or a harquebus at character creation and gain proficiency with that weapon instead o proficiency with the shortbow or the longbow (your choice). You do not gain instant access to elven grenades

Elven Flintlock Pistol or Harquebus: These weapons make a loud crack ng noise when fired. They are more accurate than medieval ranged weapons, granting a +1 bonus to the attack roll. Bullets fired from either weapon are typically made of cold-forged iron or silver.

Elven Grenade: This pear-shaped explosive is comprised of magical blast powder encased in a shell of cold-forged iron or silver. When lit and hurled, it explodes and is destroyed, scattering cold-forged iron or silver shrapnel in a 20-foot radius from the point of detonation. All creatures in the area of effect must make a DC 10 Dexterity saving throw. The target takes full damage on a failed save and half damage on a successful save.

WEAPONS

Name	Price	Damage	Weight	Properties
Special Weapons				
Elven flintlock pistol	—	1d8 piercing	2 lb.	Loading, missile range 100/400, special
Elven harquebus	—	1d10 piercing	7 lb.	Loading, missile range 150/600, two-handed, special
Elven grenade	—	4d6 piercing	1 lb.	Thrown range 50/150
Ammunition				
Cold-forged iron bullets (10)	10 gp	—	2 lb.	—
Silver bullets (10)	5 gp	—	1 lb.	—

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The Village of Rondel (Campaign Start)

This is where the Valoreign campaign begins.

Rondel is a rustic, riverside settlement in the Duchy of Warfield, about 60 miles north of Valorstand. Known for its apple orchards, turnip farms, sheep pastures, and fishing, Rondel has a population of roughly 200 (mostly humans with a handful of ale-swilling hill dwarves and river-rafting halflings). The village vicar, Nathaniel Carmichael, is a pious man with three daughters, a son, and a lovely wife, appointed to his post by the Duke of Warfield, Sir Everley Falkonmore, Knight-Commander of the Order of the Hearth.

Nothing of consequence ever happens in Rondel. The citizens pay their taxes to appease the king and the dragons, and local festivals throughout the year keep spirits high. It's a quiet burg inhabited by quiet people. The springs and summers are beautiful and warm, if a touch humid. The falls and winters are cold, wet, and foggy. It rains a lot, so folk are used to staying indoors by the fire for half the year.

Important features in the village include:

Black Hart, The: The local inn is named after its most celebrated feature—a black stag's head mounted above the common room hearth. It's not such a big deal, but the innkeeper, Henry Horner, is fond of inventing tall tales about how the stag met its end, the most popular being that it was chased into the village by hunters, blundered into the tavern to escape their arrows, and slain by multiple *magic missiles* after it overturned a table where a traveling wizard and her young apprentices were playing cards. Since the Night of Wild Magic, the mounted head has begun to animate and talk wh ever the moon is full, much to everyone's consternation.

Church of St. Charlyle: This mall wooden house of worship is dedicated to the patron saint of vintners and candle-makers. The attenda priest is young fire-and-brimstone cleric named Father Algernon Fitzgibbons. He hasn't slept well and h s been on edg since the Night of Wild Magic.

Rondel River: The v age takes its name from the river on whose north shore it rests. A small halfling river-raft community used to b situated ne the b ge that spans the river (leading to Valorstand), but irksome sprites left behind by the Night of W ld Mag drov the halflings farther downriver.

Vicar's Manse: The vicar's house is m e of stone with a sagging tile roof. The vicar's teenaged son, Oliver, has not been seen since the Night of W ld Ma ic, and f ks claim to have heard strange noises issuing from the vicar's locked barn, leading to specu ation tha p or liver was the victim of a magical curse. Late night visits by Father Fitzgibbons only adds to growing conc rns.

Webb's Apothecary: The half-elf apotheca y, Leshanna W b brews potions and poultices when she's not dabbling in witchcraft, the practice of which perfectl egal. The Night of Wild Magic not only caused her recipe books to sprout wings and fly away but al cau ed he house to sprout giant bird's feet. Occasionally the house "goes for a walk" without Angela's consent—often wit her trapp d inside it, yelling nasty epithets.

Worg's Bane Tower: An old stone watchtower north of e village built ver a century ago to warn villagers of goblins worg-riders, harbors a tall, bearded ranger nam d John rmridge, asked by the duke with scouting the northern reaches of the duchy from Rondel to the Hundredh l bo der. It's a daunting task, but "Tall John" (as he is known to many locals) has never shied away from a cha enge. He s lain his sh re of goblins, worgs, and other monsters, and he prefers to be left alone except on nights when he drinks himse f silly under Henry Horner's roof and haunts others with sobering tales of bloodshed and murder.

Sample Character Hooks

Your character is either a resident of Rondel or a visitor. Here are some possible hooks to explain why your character is here when the campaign begins:

Inn Debt: Henry Horner generously loaned your family some money, and you've been working off the debt by cleaning stables, shoeing horses, and tending bar at the Black Hart. The inn is a lively place where you can overhear rumors, meet visitors, and pick a fight all in a single evening.

Church Business: You're a visitor come to Rondel to investigate rumors that the local priest, Father Fitzgibbons, has been leading strange sermons that aren't in keeping with church doctrine, or you have come to collect a rare religious tome that Father Fitzgibbons has been hoarding against your abbey's wishes.

Webb's Kin: You're a distant relative of the half-elf apothecary, Leshanna Webb. You either live with her or visit her on occasion, bringing ingredients and new recipes.

Ex-Militia: You're formerly of the militia. Perhaps you were arrested and disciplined for some infraction and only recently found yourself in Rondel, or maybe you left the militia to take over your father's farm after he disappeared during the Night of Wild Magic.

Wizard's Test: You've been sent by your wizardly master to catalog all of the weird events in Rondel that have taken place since the Night of Wild Magic and file a report. Your master calls this your latest "test."

Lost and Found: You grew up in an orphanage and only recently learned that your father or mother is alive and living in Rondel. The lost parent might be Henry Horner, Leshanna Webb, or "Tall John" Harmridge.

Noble Born: You're of noble birth. You might be the bastard son or beloved daughter of Duke Falconmore or one of his knights, come to Rondel to escape your unhappy life, meet a secret lover, or challenge someone who has defamed your family's name.